WORLDS OF TOMORROW

AUGUST 1964

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Philip K. Dick

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An Insider's Eye View of The Armament That May Fight Tomorrow's Space Wars.

by JOSEPH WESLEY

VALENTINE'S PLANET

A Thrilling Novel of Adventure Across The Star Frontier.

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

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WORLDS OF TOMORROW®

AUGUST 1964

Vol. 2 No. 3

ALL NEW STORIES

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IMMORTALITY — AND AFTER

Lately in that handsome and stimulating magazine, *Playboy*, we had an opportunity to present a picture of the prospects for the prolongation of human life. We touched on the biochemistry of aging and what might be done to slow it down or reverse it; on the transplant of organs and rebuilding of ancient bodies; even on such far-out possibilities as the storage of the intellect (or personality, or even, if you like, the soul) in the magnetic cores of a super-computer; and we wound up with a reference to the work by R. C. W. Ettinger, *The Prospect of Immortality*, which senior readers may remember we previewed in this magazine a little over a year ago.

It was good news to us, and we think will be to some of our readers as well, that Ettinger's book has just appeared in an enlarged, revised and extended form under the Doubleday imprint. If you missed it here, it's worth your while to look into the new book form. For what Ettinger says is another step in the process of bringing what was at one time a dream of science-fiction writers closer to realization. It is, in fact, a promise to eternal—or at least indefinitely prolonged — life through freezing.

What is most astonishing about the two basic premises on which Ettinger's whole case rests is not that they are new or revolutionary, but that they are so essentially familiar and comprehensible that almost any human being can make his own judgment on whether or not they hold water.

Premise 1: If stored at a sufficiently cold temperature—say, the temperature of liquid helium, not too many degrees above absolute zero—organic matter suffers no chemical change in any detectable degree over a period to be measured not in years or centuries, but in thousands or even millions of years.

Premise 2: Whatever damage a human body may sustain to cause death (as defined by current clinical standards), it is strongly probable that medical science will find a way to repair that damage at some time in the future history of the human race. *Any* damage—including any incidental damage that may occur in the process of freezing itself.

And what these two premises add up to is, indeed, immortality, for if you die today of a heart attack, are frozen until such time as your friendly neighborhood hospital has de-

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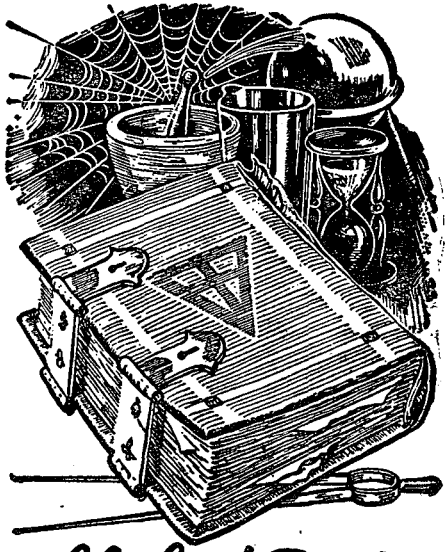
Secrets entrusted to a few



The Unpublished Facts of Life

THERE are some things that cannot be generally told—*things you ought to know.* Great truths are dangerous to some—but factors for *personal power* and *accomplishment* in the hands of those who understand them. Behind the tales of the miracles and mysteries of the ancients, lie centuries of their secret probing into nature's laws—their amazing discoveries of *the hidden processes of man's mind,* and *the mastery of life's problems.* Once shrouded in mystery to avoid their destruction by mass fear and ignorance, these facts remain a useful heritage for the thousands of men and women who privately use them in their homes today.

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veloped and acquired the equipment to supply you with a mechanical heart and are then thawed, fitted with your prosthesis and sent on your way, you have perhaps a couple of decades of life until you die again—perhaps of a stroke. But that is no more an end than your coronary; back to the freezer, and back out again when some suitable means has been found to repair the damage of the stroke . . . and so on, indefinitely.

Of course, this brief mention only scratches the surface of what is a large and exciting thesis, and we suggest that this is a book you will want to read in full. At the least, it is interesting. At the most—well, just how important is your life to you, anyway?

In fact, we thought it so interesting that we have just secured Ettinger's promise to do a follow-up piece for us, which we hope to print very soon—in the next issue, if we can get it in time, or as soon thereafter as we can arrange it. This will not be a rehash of what has already appeared, either here or in the expanded book version, but will supplement them . . . and, we think, will set you thinking in terms you never expected to apply to yourself!

By the way — touching on the point we made a moment ago about science-fiction dreams becoming hard fact, we came across a quotation not long ago which struck us with a sharp impact.

Science fiction, we have always maintained, does have a certain predictive value. Perhaps this is not its principal value, but it is definitely there; but we have never thought of science fiction as being a more reliable guide to the future than the scientists who were actually doing the most advanced and seminal work in the very areas under discussion.

Now we're not so sure. Take atomic power, for instance.

Antiquarian readers may remember that atomic power and atom bombs were familiar subjects in a number of science-fiction stories back as far as 1928 and 1929 at least — say, when Doc Smith's *The Skylark of Space* was first published. They were so familiar, in fact, that along about 1934 John Campbell was inspired to write a story called *When the Atoms Failed,* dealing not merely with atomic power but with its successor, the power to be derived from the annihilation of matter entirely.

Well, in 1934, about the time that story appeared, a rather well known scientist said: "I feel absolutely sure, nearly sure, that it will not be possible to convert matter into energy for practical purposes. You must use a lot of energy to get the energy out of the molecule, and the rest is lost."

Fellow was wrong of course. But you can't say he didn't have a right to an opinion, since he was the man who started the whole thing. His name was Albert Einstein.

— FREDERIK POHL

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VALENTINE'S PLANET

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

Illustrated by MORROW

He was cast off by a mutinous crew in the deeps of space—and he fought across the stars to a new world and a new life!

I

It had not been a bloodless mutiny by any means. The Second Officer in particular had fought on with his fists long after every one else had capitulated. He must have crippled a good few of them, and their friends had kicked him to death rather leisurely while the discussion about what to do with the surviving officers and loyal crewmen went on. He must have been in great pain. Nothing else could have caused him to make quite so much noise; and it bothered Captain Marrus Rond that he couldn't seem to remember the man's name.

Of course, others had been killed, too, but Rond hadn't seen it hap-

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pen, hadn't even seen their bodies. So their deaths didn't seem altogether real to him. But, then, neither did anything else.

Nothing was real, all was illusion . . . what did they used to say on Island L'yong on whatever that planet's name was? The one in the P'vong Cluster? Oh, yes. "*I am being dreamed* . . ." And there was another saying, in one of the Archaic Romanic tongues of the pre-Technic Period, "*Life is a dream, and the dream is but a dream itself.*" That being the case, best to forget bad ones about familiar faces going bloody and making horrible sounds. Best to forget.

Captain Rond desisted from conscious thought, slipped easily into uneasy sleep once more. He mouthed and moaned. But he did not know it.

"Only a fool points a gun when he doesn't have to," Larran Cane was saying. "And only a fool doesn't point a gun when he has to."

"Yes," said Jory. "Yes, father." And wondered why his father was pointing a gun at him now. But that was all wrong, he was telescoping things. His father had died the year Jory entered the Third Academy. It must have been the sight of Aysil Stone, with a gun in *his* hand, which had subconsciously reminded him. But why was Aysil Stone —?

"On your lily-white, unsullied feet, former First Officer Jory Cane, and hop to it!"

The last words were almost screamed. White patches came and went on the man's swollen face, his familiar red and swollen face, now so suddenly so unfamiliar.

Jory hopped.

"'I'm afraid the Leading Officer is drunk,'" Stone mimicked. "Why don't you say it? You've said it often enough before on this voyage. So why not say it now?" His breath sounded, trembling, in his nose.

Jory had said it, often enough. That was true. Stone and he had made other voyages together— the Harrison-Hudson run, the Cluster tour and the long, long haul to solitary Trismegistus — and Stone had been often drunk before, but never so often as this voyage. Jory was a new, green fourth mate and Aysil Stone was Mister First himself, right below the Leading Officer, who was right below the almighty Captain himself, on that first voyage together on the HH run — way off in the blue-white suns of the Lace Pattern. "A new brat," he said at their first sighting, friendly enough. The new brat smiled. The cant phrase itself had reassured him more that he was really a ship's officer than the uniform had. "I hope you keep that smile, brat," said Aysil Stone (his face then had been merely ruddy, merely full). "I've been a first officer almost as long as you've been alive, and I quit smiling a long long time ago. It's the breaks, brat. Either you get them or you don't. I don't. I *used* to get them. But not any more." And Jory Cane had smelled his breath . . .

He could smell it now, not just the strong reek of the pale green

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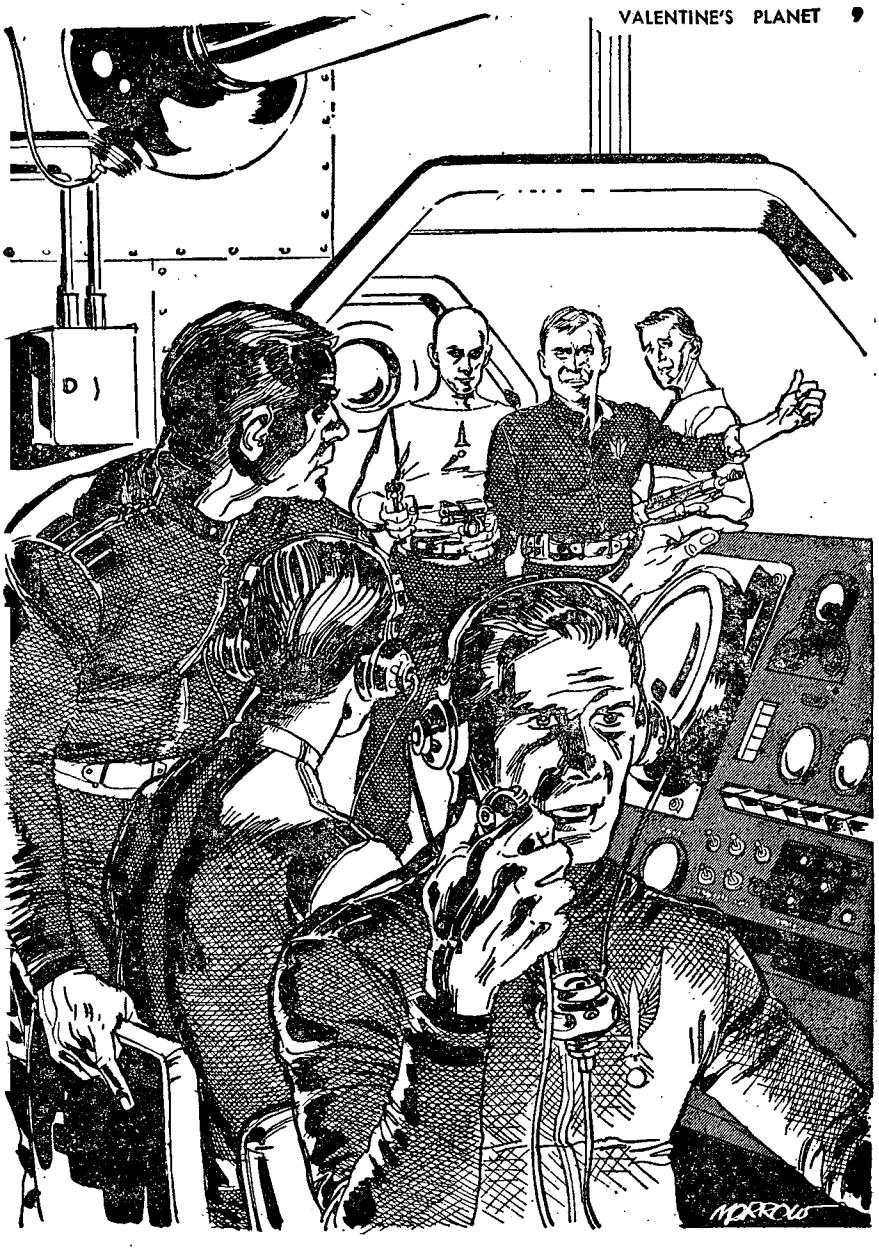

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distillate, but the harsh odor of ten thousand gallons of it, poured into the man's mouth over the courses of the years, inhaled and ingested and digested and exhaled and transpired and flatulated and sternutated and voided and eructed and every other action of which the body mechanism was capable; until it was a part of him and yet apart from him, like an aura, like an atmosphere. Like a troposphere. And full of his other, own bad smells, his muscles tense.

"Aysil, what the hell is this about?" he demanded now, keeping his hands flat at his sides.

Aysil Stone grinned his crooked grin. For a moment Jory felt it was some minor — mad, but minor — caper. And relaxed. The gun, which had sagged a bit, now came up, sharp. The grin vanished.

"It's the breaks, former First Officer Cane. I never got them, not till old Jarvy dropped dead and went out the garbage chute one week from port. So the Man made *me* L. O. Seniority forever, hurrah, boys, hurrah. Only, it's for this voyage only. I'll never make another, not as L. O. or as any other O. Too much greensleeve, brat as who knows better? I'll be cashiered — hey? On the beach — hey? At my age and with my service record — hey? No, thank you. I never got the breaks, so now I'll make the breaks."

He flicked his finger at the light-stud of the wall-communicator. Until that moment Jory hadn't even realized that Stone must have flecked it silent when he came in. The sound panel seemed to explode as if in furious resentment at having been muted. Whoops, howls, laughs, screams, songs, shots — it was this last which convinced Jory that none of the noise was electronic. "I — hear this, now hear this, now hear this, now you *listening*, all you apes and officers? You *listening —?"* Roars, whistles, hoots, shrieks. "Second Officer Toms Tarkington just tried to swallow a mouthful of bloody teeth but seems like — hey hey! — he must of just bust a gut or something! Seems like they didn't agree with him because he couldn't keep 'em down!"

And over and above all the noise (thuds, blows and a horrible kind of howl that Jory had never heard before, noise which his mind gave an almost physical wrench of refusal even to try to identify) a voice, suddenly, harsh and hoarse but quite devoid of any of the hysteria of the preceding voice. It said: "Ays, where in the hell are you? Get your drunken butt up here topside, right now." *Click*, and the communicator was cut off at Central.

Once more Aysil Stone's crooked grin. "What's that old line from the Old Books?" he asked. " 'Better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven'? Let's go, brat." He gestured with his gun towards the cabin door. "Let's go."

Now, why was Larran Cane turning his face away? Was he angry? It was very odd, all very odd. Jory felt that he wanted to pull the covers over his head and go back to sleep.

Just go back to sleep . . .

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A little creature very much like a lizard sat on a twig surveying something new and vast which he saw without seeing. Presently a pouch of skin at his throat inflated and bulged out. The little creature began to sing and warble like a bird.

II

Lockharn felt the cramp in his foot again. The only thing for it was to get up and stand on it. The pressure of weight would straighten it out right away. Get up and stand on it. Only he was too tired.

He wasn't a young man any more. But after this trip, boy, he would pension out, you see if he didn't, and he'd buy that farm, you see if he didn't, let them all laugh at him, never mind. Only his foot . . .

Lockharn had been lying in his rack, looking at catalogues. It was his favorite form of reading material. It was, in fact, almost his only form of reading material. *Retirement Ranch in the Hills of Ishtar, Southern Sector,* 1,000 *sq. km. in woodlands and mixed crops. Main cottage,* 20 *rms, latest fixtures. Rivers. Lakes. Wild life. Game preserve. Price* 800,000. *Nice little place for right party.*

Lots of space-apes settled on Ishtar when they pensioned-out — those who'd kept up their pensions, that is. Lots didn't. And 800,000 . . . he'd saved just about three-and-a-half times that. Say another 800,000 to get the place fixed up right, because no matter what they might tell you it always took at least as much as the price of a farm to fix a farm up right. A few hundred thousand to live on till the income started coming in. And the rest, well, the rest for emergencies. Always keep something banked for emergencies.

And then the emergency came. And the bank didn't help a bit.

The communicator said, "Now hear this, now hear this. Starship *Persephone* is no longer the property of the Guild of the Third Academy. It is no longer under the command of former Captain Marrus Alton Rond. Starship *Persephone* is now the property of her crew — you and me, guys — and the command will be exercized for the moment by a junta consisting of Leading Officer Aysil Stone, Bosun Blaise Danley and Crew G. Race, S. Rase and S. T. Clennor. An advisory committee to assist the junta will be elected as soon as we get things straightened out.

"This is a Free Ship now, and everybody better know what that means. Anybody don't, be glad to explain. Any officers still at large, come in with your hands flat on top your heads. Things are still peaceful, so let's keep it like that. And you space-apes who haven't signed the Declaration, don't hang around picking your toes, for — sake, come on out and *sign* it!"

Slowly, slowly, very slowly, Lockharn started getting up from his rack. It was the obscenity which told him that there was no joke.

The clamor starting in the corri-

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dor would have warned him, soon enough, that something was very, very wrong. Too, you didn't joke about Free Ships over the communicator of a straight ship or josh officers like that. But — most of all — it was the single, short obscenity. A word which Lockharn heard a thousand times each day and never had thought twice about until now, when, he heard it for what he realized (and a sick realization it was, too) was the first time over the communicator. It said more to him than a thousand clamors.

It said beyond possibility of mistake that Captain Marrus Alton Rond *was* no longer in command of Starship *Persephone.*

Men ran down the corridors shouting insanely, clapping each other on the back, punching and embracing each other. Two stewards and a storekeeper were doing a sedate little dance in the middle of it all, bowing and gesturing to each other. They broke off when they saw him emerge, burst into broad grins.

"Locky! A Free Ship!"

"Hey, Pops, we're gunna take the *Persy* to P'vong Cluster, and sell her to the Forty Thieves. Hey, Pops?"

"Locky! Locky! We'll all be *millionaires!*"

He said, stiffly, "It's mutiny."

They laughed. They stopped. Then the storekeeper said, "It's the farm. He's worrying about the farm." And they all burst out laughing again. Carefully, their arms around him, they explained that he'd be able to buy all the farms he wanted — a dozen, a hundred, five hundred farms — with his share of the fabulous price the ship would bring on the Cluster's famous and fabulous free market. He could even have his savings transferred, they assured him, although it would be only a drop in the bucket compared to his cut of the ship-price. There were twenty habitable planets in the Cluster, each one crazier and wilder and better than the other. He could buy a farm on each one and have his own private and personal gig to visit between them.

"Because the beauty of it, Locky, the *beauty* of it — not only do they *rec*ognize the Free Ship principle there —"

"'*Rec*ognize' it? Hell, boy, they *invented* it!"

"But, no extradition, Locky! No extradition!"

"It's a dream, it's a dream, it's a dream."

Lockharn shook his head. "It's mutiny," he said.

And so, after a while, they took his hands and put them flat on his head, and they marched him along and out and up to Central. They did stop, once, and tried to make him sign the Declaration, but he wouldn't. And the other rioters, the other mutineers (how funny the word sounded!), spat at him, some of them; called him *scab* and fink and *scissorbill* and *sham-ape*; called him things he didn't want ever to remember again. And made him watch what they did to Second Officer Tarkington. But he wouldn't remember that. He wouldn't. He

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felt the pain of every boot and blow.

He felt the pain of his cramped leg, but maybe if he went back to sleep again. Somewhere he heard a bird singing and somehow he knew it wasn't a bird and that was right because how could there be a bird out here —

Out *where?*

The cramp surged up — once — then vanished. And he knew that was because he was on his feet, knew it before he even opened his eyes to see that he was on his feet.

"I said it before, but I'll say it once again — I wouldn't wonder if some of you were too confused to remember. I appreciate the choice you made."

Captain Rond was speaking. Jory Cane felt a touch of vertigo and sat down, abruptly. His head hurt him, terribly. The hatchway of the pettyboat was open and the air coming in was clear and sweet, but the old air was not yet altogether gone. Whenever he caught a breath of it, stale and foul and evil, he felt the muscles of his chin tighten and the muscles of his stomach knot.

"Although it was, naturally, the only choice any decent man had to make. The Guild won't forget it." Marrus Rond's voice was as calm as it always was.

Calmly, "*Am I not to have another weapon, gentlemen of the junta?*" Not, *Can't I have,* that would be pleading. Not, *I must have,* that would be lording it. No . . . just the right note, the absolutely correct choice, neither diminishing what position he still had by belittling himself nor imperilling it by a pretence to power he no longer held. "*Having capitulated, custom calls for me to retain my side-arm. And a weapon is part of the invariable emergency stores of a pettyboat.*" So Jory remembered Rond in those last few moments before the eight of them were packed off into the pettyboat. And Blaise —

Blaise said, "*Well, huh!*" And then, "*Oh, what the Hell, give the old poke another iron.*"

And Aysil Stone said, "*I see no objection, I suppose.*"

"*Second the motion,*" said one of the others on the junta.

And so it had gone. What started out a rout, with the possibility of becoming a massacre, had become a dignified departure, with three times the amount of stores originally allotted. Jory, who had never once heard his C. O. mention the words "Free Ship" or "Mutiny" before, listened and wondered as Rond calmly quoted chapter and verse. *The Free Ship* Polydore *allowed its pettyboat special surgical supplies, I believe you will find . . . In the case of the* Narwhal VI — *correct me, Bosun, if I'm wrong — didn't her junta install a reserve engine as well? . . .* And he suggested that they engage the services of appraisers and not grab the first offer made for the ship, because it would be felt offensive by the Guild if one of its vessels went for less than its full worth.

All that, Jory remembered. But —

"Captain, where are we now?"

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The thin calm face looked at him a trifle reproachfully. "I had not intended to conceal that from you, Mr. First," he said.

He turned his head and tilted his chin towards the open hatchway, towards the clean, sweet air and the curious not-quite-birdsong. "We are on an island a very short distance off the coast of the rather small continent which forms the chief land mass of the northern hemisphere of Valentine's Planet.

"So far as I know, we are the first of any Technic civilization to set down here. I trust we will not be here long. We must replenish our fuel — well, other stores, too, I suppose, but fuel is the must — and then we will continue until contact is established with another T-world. Preferably one with a Guild installation."

The pettyboat lay on her long side. She had evidently made a long, slow landing in deep sand, and it wasn't even necessary to drop a ladder. Jory walked out the open hatchway. Captain Rond followed, at his leisure, after the other six men had done the same, and called them by name. "Lockharn, Levvis, Storm, Mars, Duston, Crammer. Don't try to do too much at once. You and I must have a gam, Mister First, when you are feeling better."

The setting sun was red and large. A surf beat, somewhere far out of sight. The men walked unsteadily, sat down one by one on the sand dunes. He could hear them breathing deeply, noisily.

It was more than clean and sweet, the air — it was, well, it was exciting. There seemed more ozone in it, for one thing, than he was used to. And the salt water smell had an extra overtone, which he thought might be a seaweed. There were vegetation smells . . . trees and leafmold and flowers . . . a touch of smoke, perhaps. A lightning-struck tree. Lightning would account for the ozone, too. The air rose and fell and pushed softly but firmly against him, like the body of a young woman; like a young woman cool and clean and somewhat wet from the water.

"What the fuel possibilities are here, I confess I have no idea." Captain Rond had joined Jory on the log he'd picked for his seat. "With the special equipment I was able to obtain from our captors, we should be able to refine any petroleum we find. Alcohol will be no problem; almost anything that grows can be distilled, one way or another, I suppose. But if there's no petroleum, well, then we'll have to look around for an exotic. Which might take us longer, but it can't be helped."

He made no mention of the narrow strait before them, or the opposite wooded shore. The air evidently did not smell exciting to him, it just smelled like air.

"This is a nice place, Captain," Jory said.

"Why, yes. I suppose it is." Rond seemed mildly surprised. "But don't get too fond of it. We won't be here long."

Mars, who had been a steward,

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had something in his hand . . . a tube of paste food. They each took a squeeze.

Jory's stomach sprang to life again, but this time with hunger instead of nausea. He looked around, but there was nothing resembling fruit on the trees. The bark was curiously marked, with round swellings embossed with tinier ones. There was a blue tint to the leaves.

"I wonder if there's fish, or anything else edible, in that water."

"Duston's taking care of that now, First. I gave him the equipment from the emergency stores . . . Well, you do want to know what we are doing here on Valentine's Planet, which is in G-27, instead of our being back in C-3, don't you?"

Jory licked the last drop of paste food from his palate. "Why, yes, sir. I do. But I didn't suppose that you intended to conceal it from me."

Rond drew in the sand with a stick. "You're a saucy fellow, Mr. Cane, but a loyal one. *Well.* It was intended by those rogues in the junta that we should make for C-3, where the Second Academy's Guild has a Spotting Station, of course. But I'm afraid that wouldn't do. No, sir, it wouldn't do at all."

The cool wind was like a long drink of clean water. Cane thought of clean water, water that hadn't been used, re-used, refined, distilled, redistilled, aerated — the works — a hundred hundred times. There might be a spring somewhere. Or, he could dig in the sand and see if . . . but not now. He was tired, suddenly. Infinitely tired. But not too tired to wonder how they could have made a journey of such an impossible length. *G*-27! How could they conceivably have made it to such a distant sector?

"Why not, sir?"

There were many reasons, Rond explained, still drawing in the sand. For one thing, as his First Officer must know, relations between their own Guild and the Second Academy's Guild weren't too good at the present time. The Guild wouldn't like its men to have to appeal to the other one for assistance. Furthermore, the Spotting Station was on a Dead World, and had a complement of only three men. An additional eight would have made it impossible for them to hold out till Relief, they would have to appeal for immediate supplies, and this, of course, would be embarrassing . . .

And so, rather than be embarrassed (Jory thought, anger almost lost at the man's infinite effrontery — and infinite courage) . . .

"Besides, you see, there was no reason to believe that the mutineers mightn't have changed their minds. And they could — and in such a case probably would — find us waiting for them there on C-3. Whereas, you know, *here* —"

It made sense. It did make sense. "But . . . sir . . . the distance . . .?"

"There was enough fuel. Barely enough."

Jory shook his head, impatiently.

"I meant food. We must have gone ten times past the break point. You can only regenerate so many times before there's nothing more to reclaim from the wastes, you know."

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Captain Rond scratched out his drawings, tossed the stick away. "You're thinking in terms of normal metabolism," he said. "Ours wasn't normal. We were on double-slow NH."

The full picture came as abruptly to Jory Cane's mind as the sudden smell of smoke again. Of course men under narcohypnosis had a slower metabolism. Under slow NH, even more so. But slow NH was dangerous in the extreme, almost never used, and then only briefly. And as for *double*-slow — !

"I thought," he said slowly, "that it wasn't allowed to put men on double-slow without permission. And I don't remember having given mine."

"You didn't," said Captain Rond, almost cheerfully. "There was no time to gain. I made the decision. Obviously the right one. I know what you are thinking, *He saved a pettyboat and lost a ship,* but —"

Sharp on the *but* came a shout. Half the men were on their feet, the others had fallen on hands and knees in trying to rise. Hands were pointing, waving, gesturing towards the main shore. Duston came running, stumbling. "Something in the bosky over there, Captain! Something moved, I saw it, moved in the bushes!"

The sun was dipping into the water. The counter-coast looked blue and dim. Jory peered, but saw nothing which might not have been the breeze. "An animal?" he suggested.

"No, sir. Not an animal."

That persistent tinge of smoke, coming and going on the edges of his perception . . . *was* it a lightning-struck tree?

"A man?"

Dunston shook his head. "No, no man. It was too small for a man." He turned, looked again. His heavy face showed not so much alarm as suspicion. Puzzlement.

Rond got briskly to his feet, brushed off sand. "Duston, you will take the first watch. Draw a weapon from the First Officer. I will relieve you in two hours. We had better see about food. Then, perhaps, sleep. Real sleep."

Just before Jory lay down he heard Rond say, " 'The rude mind with difficulty associates the ideas of power and benignity' — remember that, Cane. It's from George Elliott, a 20th century poet, in case pre-Technic Lit is no longer being taught at the Academy."

And, somewhat later, before sleep — real sleep — came rolling in like a fog — Jory heard, or thought he heard, Duston mutter once again. "It was too small for a man."

III

The sun rose next day a pale orange-yellow in the clear air. The scent-lures on the fishing tackle in the emergency gear had brought in a catch of a half-dozen creatures rather more like trilobites than fish, each the size of a man's arm. Pieces of Allen's Paper were affixed to parts of one, cut up for the test. They waited the required half hour and then, the paper hav-

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ing remained uncolored, they grilled and ate the lot.

Captain Rond cleared his throat and gestured to the men to dispose of the remains of the meal. Jory did not envy the man's position. Timewise, Rond's career was halfway over. To have had his ship stolen from him (and from the Guild), might well mean it was entirely over. Unless he was willing, for his pension's sake, to take some obscure post at reduced pay. On the other hand, should he come well out of it — get the ship back, for example — he might actually come out ahead. Which was unlikely.

Jory's own status was equivocal. On the one hand, the Guild Directorate could hardly blame a First officer for mutiny, and Rond was not the type to try shifting the blame onto him. If they made a bad return, one costly or embarrassing, say, then he would share in Rond's disgrace — and without the hope of a half-pay post. Not that he'd be likely to take one. A good return, in which he figured well, would be to his own credit, also. An ordinary one? Ordinary from the distant viewpoint of the Directorate, that was. Well, they'd watch him carefully from that time on. And any question which might come up would find his name remembered. "Cane? Isn't that the Cane who was in the *Persephone?*" And that would be that.

As if the captain had been reading his mind, this was the precise point at which Rond chose to begin in talking, now, to the men.

"You have separated yourselves from the boys," he said. "I will recommend you for double pay dating from the mutiny and until we sign in aboard a Guild ship or other installation. I will further recommend that you all be advanced two places in rank, and — while I cannot promise — I should think a special service bonus very likely, too."

One of the men said, judiciously, "Well . . . I don't think I'll spend mine just yet." A chuckle ran through the little group. Jory looked at the man who'd spoken. "Storm," they called him, but he didn't know if it was his real name or a nickname. A young man, with a pleasant and mildly ugly face. He knew little enough about any of the men. A First Officer wouldn't. But he was certainly going to get to know more about them, that was sure. And they about him.

Rond smiled faintly. "It would be foolish of me to minimize the dangers and difficulties of our position," he said. "We are on a world all but unknown to the worlds we know, and about the only thing known about it previously was that it was here . . . and had a breathable atmosphere. Those two things were enough to convince me that I had the one thing we immediately needed — a place of refuge. A starting point for the long road back. Our position is not only a hard one, it is a classical one. We are castaways. Other loyal members of mutinous ships have been murdered, or sent off in pettyboats which could not conceivably have brought them to any place of safety. We are fortunate."

He told them of groups which

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had made it back safely. Some, they had heard of — *Neptune VI, Antigone, Dancer, Guildsman II.* Others were new to them, though not all of these had been involved in mutiny. Leading Officer Shohet and ten men, when the *Jeremias* crashed on Hyperion Beta. The four crewmen and two passengers of the *Bonavita,* disabled in magnetic storms between the Lace Pattern and the Rim, under the leadership of Dr. Oliphant. And, of course, the legendary but none-the-less actual exploits of the Six Stewards of Centauri. "Although I don't expect it will take *us* twenty years, nor are we burdened with the ship's treasury, as they were," he commented.

Their immediate job was to find fuel. If Valentine's Planet supported a Technic-civilization, and if it was not a hostile one, this would be easy. But every hour which passed without contact decreased the likelihood that they were on a T-world. If there were inhabitants with even a rudimentary knowledge of the planet's mineral resources, if they could get from them some sort of clue to the location of, say, petroleum —

"Captain."

"Steward Mars. Yes."

"Why start at the bottom? Why not look for fissables right off?"

Jory picked up that one. "Mars, if we've got a pre-T population here, they won't know what a fissive is, while oil often seeps up to the surface, or releases gases which catch fire. And if we can crack oil, we can scan the whole world with the pettyboat, checking for radiation. If we find the right kind, good. If not well, we've still got our liquid fuel."

"Okay, First." Mars nodded.

Rond nodded, too. Then he gave his orders.

Sunlight and shadow dappled the ground. Clean clothes felt good, and so did clean bodies. Rond had ordered a general wash-up (or, rather, had directed Jory Cane to do so) before they moved out. Crammer had volunteered to stay behind to guard the pettyboat.

Jory had wanted another man to remain with him, but Rond felt that the laser-gun was by itself worth several men — assuming that anything (or anybody) got by the watch-wires or -wards. Which was unlikely. So they inflated the dinghy, fastened the line and crossed the narrow strait to the main-land. Crammer hauled in the dinghy. They waved, he waved back. They moved on. Three times a day he and Rond would be in touch via their tiny pectoral communicators. Crammer said he wouldn't be lonely.

Rond had the other weapon, of course. The rest had fashioned hafts to which their emergency-kit knives were snapped, forming effective if makeshift spears. Jory carried the flare-shooter. If any craft were sighted or heard overhead, he would fire a signal. Smoke by day, it would show up as fire by night. "Almost Biblical, isn't it?" was Rond's comment.

Rivers, or streams too broad to ford, would present a problem, not so much in tactics as in policy. Was

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there an intelligent race here? Was it friendly? If so, they should move downstream, for there seemed a sort of universal tendency for settlements to increase in size and number as a river progressed towards its mouth. If, on the other hand, if there was no intelligent race — or if it were hostile — then they ought to go upstream, where it might be easier to cross and less likely that they would be seen.

They passed on, now, through countryside of a temperate zone type. There were too many trees for it to be savannah, and too few for it to be a forest. The effect was rather like the Great Park on Island L'vong in the P'vong Cluster, though — so far — without any signs that it was, like Island L'vong, thoroughly inhabited.

Inhabited by men, that is. There was certainly life.

It was Levvis, the tall riggerman, who first pointed. "Hey, Duston, was that what you saw last night?" he asked, gesturing.

There were three or four of them, like large and fat gray lizards, and they moved slowly along, grazing the leafy grass. Lizards, of course, did not have six feet.

"Nope," said Duston, firmly. "Uh-uh. Too small."

Levvis tossed a twig at one of them. "*Awk,*" it said, looking up, its mouth full of brouse. "*Awk* . . ."

The engineman laughed. "That's its name," he said. "The awk."

Rond's dry voice commented, "Levvis's awk. As its discoverer, you are entitled to the honor, Riggerman. But I would refrain from tossing twigs. The fact that it eats grass does not prove it might not eat flesh. On the old Homeworld there were said to be but four omnivorous creatures, *'The rat, the roach, the pig, the man.'* Other planets have proven more prolific in omnivores."

They reached a slight but definite upward tilt of land when the grayhaired systemsman, Lockharn, spoke, almost for the first time. "I wonder it didn't run away," he said, thoughtfully. "I wonder none of them do . . . see? It could mean two things, that *I* can think of. Maybe there aren't any dangerous forms of life here on Valentine's." He stopped. A fallen tree barred their way. It was so long that Jory gestured them to climb over rather than walk around. The trees were growing thicker now.

"What's the other thing it could mean, Lockie, you think?" Mars asked.

"Why," Lockharn said, mildly surprised that this wasn't obvious, "maybe they're domestic."

Someone said, *"Psst"* — and pointed.

One of the awks crawled off a heap of leaves, waddled down to thrust a long, bifurcated tongue into a tiny stream. Something scuttled swiftly down from a tree, dug into the heap, emerged with something in its mouth, swiftly scuttled back up the tree again. The awk waddled back to its nest and sat down again. A leathery yellow-gray flake of shell spiraled down from the tree. And another. "If it was me that saw it," Storm said, "I wouldn't

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let on. I wouldn't want it to be known as 'Storm's egg-sucker. I—"

His sentence was never finished, nor did the last piece of shell ever seem to finish its fall. In a flat, tight voice, Duston said, "Oh, there they are—"

And there they were. Two of them.

He had been right. Not animals. And too small to be men. What was the answer? Obviously, Jory thought, in the microsecond or two before everything started moving again—obviously, children! They hadn't thought of that.

The two came into the clearing together, long sticks in their hands. After that first frozen moment, one of them uttered a high cry of fright and turned and fled. The other started to follow, tripped, let out a wail, scrambled up again and darted away... only to look back and run headlong into a tree. This time there was no getting up.

Captain Rond and Levvis knelt. The others stood around. The child had red hair, auburn almost, Jory thought... or chestnut. Rond fingered the kilted robe with its intricate pattern of curling intertwined leafy sprigs. "Too bad," he murmured. "Woven stuff. Almost certainly a pre-T cluture. Too bad."

"How's the *kid*, Captain?" Mars asked, slightly impatiently.

"I'm sure he's not hurt. Probably not even unconscious... ah."

The eyelids, pale in the rather ruddy face, flickered. Rond took hold of a wrist, gently but firmly. The eyes opened.

They were green, dark green, slightly but not unpleasantly prominent, and unquestionably intelligent. The ears were thin and somewhat narrow, with long lobes. The face was heart-shaped. One small hand groped along the turf, found its stick, closed firmly around it. The other pulled, was restrained by Rond's grip. The child gave a faint cry, trembled.

Levvis took the hand and patted it. "Don't be afraid, Little Joe," he said. "No one's going to hurt you."

"Certainly not," said Rond. With his own free hand he gently tilted the small, delicate face so that the eyes looked up at his. He stroked the face from brow to chin, softly, tenderly. In a voice, low, soft, infinitely different from anything Jory had ever heard him use before he began to speak. "*Ahnaah... ahnaah... lahlaah... lahlahlaah... lahahnah...*" It was not quite a chant, not quite a singsong. Jory recognized it almost instantly; so must all the men. He heard one of them, short-breathed, awed, "*Maahmohsses.*"

Maahmohsses! The strange, the difficult, the utterly effective art of the Raangaan-tahani, the priest-physicians of planet Ur in the not quite Glactic string of stars called The Chaldees.

The curious persuasive sounds went on. The gestures continued. It was said that the sounds did not actually form words even in any of the languages of Ur, and parallels had been sought (though not satisfactorily found) in such antique phenomona as glossolalia, hypnotism

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and projection. It was not intended as a cure, or as a ceremony valid of itself. The Raangaan-tahani called it *The opening of the way*, and said that it required three conditions: the willingness of the subject, the absolute sincerity of the performer and — of course — the capacity of both. *Maahmohsses*. It annulled hostility, dissipated fright, created rapport. There was a lot more, but where fact left off and legend began, Jory did not know. He had not known that Captain Rond was a *kaapahmohsses*, an adept of the mystic art.

It occurred to him that there might well be a universe of things about Captain Rond which he did not know.

Somewhile, the child's hand had been released, and somewhile he had let go of his stick. How long had the strange, infinitely pleasant and soothing voice been silent? Jory did not know. He knew that the child was smiling, that Rond was smiling. Everyone was. On his knees now, the child searched the ground, gave a pleased little noise, plucked up a sprig of something. He gave the leaves a slight twist, handed it to Rond, and got up, a trusting smile upon his lips.

"How nice," said Rond. "How very nice." He bent over it a moment, then handed it to Jory. It went the circle, only a stem and a few leaves, bruised to release a strange and spicy-sweet scent — but in its strong, rich odor Jory Cane seemed to come aware of the whole rich world which was planet Valentine.

"Well, well," said Rond, "we must get on." He addressed the child: "Let's go, my young friend."

Little Joe smiled, thrust his stick under his arm, bowed with his hands cupped up and together and moved away. He spoke to them over his shoulder, in the husky and not unpleasant tones sometimes found in precocious children.

"Hey, Captain," said Mars, "What's the kid saying?"

"I have no idea," the captain said, serenely, marching along.

Mars seemed both surprised and disappointed. "Don't you understand each other's language now? I thought that... that..."

"No. That's one of the many fables, I'm afraid, about the art of Ur. Later, when time allows, I will arrange for language pickup in the usual manner."

The character of the land was undergoing a gradual change. Trees seemed to grow at regular intervals, to be all of a kind. Water ran alongside what was now a definite path, in a straight channel. Groups of awks were met more frequently. Every now and then Little Joe broke into a trot, his grass buskins flying, his arms beckoning. They were heading uphill when he stopped suddenly and held up his hands. A second passed. Another one. He muttered something to himself, on a questioning note. An uneasy note. Jory found himself straining his ears. Wordlessly, they all drew together.

Then it came. The sound of a rattle. The sound of stamping feet.

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The sound of metal beating on stone.

Little Joe whirled around, his face full of dismay. Speech poured forth from him, his hands pushed at the air. Plainly, he was gesturing them back, towards the wilder land below.

Rack! Rack! Rack - rack - rack!

Rack! Rack rack rack!

Without a word, they turned and fled. The clang of metal on stone ceased, abruptly. The noise of stamping feet grew duller. But the rattle grew louder. Always, as they ran, the sound of the rattle grew louder. *Rack Rack! Rack - rack - rack!*

Rack! Rack! Rack - rack - rack! Rack!

Rack! Rack! Rack rack —

The last note did not come, or, if it came, it was drowned out by the howl of many voices. Rond gestured his men to a halt, and Jory, as he turned around, breath catching painfully in his chest, saw their pursuers as they poured over the crest of the hill, a profusion of scarlet and black.

"Take cover," Rond directed. "Mr. Cane, fire a charge in front of them."

Jory Cane's first impression, as he raised the flare-shooter, was of a horde of giant insects, in scarlet and black carapaces, fanning down the hill. He made a rapid, random calculation, fired once, turned and dived into the clump of woods. He was fleetingly aware of lanky, tall Levvis crawling on knees and elbows . . . and of Little Joe, crouched on his haunches, face buried in his arms.

Making himself as small as possible, he moved around cautiously and parted the thicket just enough to peer through.

The flare had hit halfway up the slope and the dense black smoke, column thickening as it rose, billowed up without ceasing, like a cone inverted on its nose. It would do so, he knew, for hour after hour. *If the rest of this part of the continent didn't know where we were,* he thought, *it will now. Every scoutcraft for hundreds of miles—*

And then he realized.

Whatever these things were, they were certainly non-Technic. No culture with aircraft would make this kind of attack on land. He realized, too, what Rond's purpose had been in ordering the charge to be fired. It had landed, and flared, directly in the path of the attack. And it had quite disrupted it. The scarlet and black forms milled and moiled, noisily. Then one of them darted off at right angles to the smoke. A second one followed. Then a third. Then all of them. Cutting across the hillside, they would — any moment now — make a left wheel and attack down-slope again. Jory lifted the shooter, fired again.

They had started the howl again, but when the second burst of smoke arose, the noise stopped, abruptly. In the silence Jory could hear one of the men quietly praying. The insect-like figures scurried about like ants; then, still like ants, they came together in a knot. Most of them. One broke away and — followed by

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another, but by no more — came charging down the rise between the two fan-shaped columns of smoke.

Howling, howling and leaping, and waving long and glittering things above their heads, they came. Scarlet, black, scarlet and black, scarlet on black, black on scarlet, howling and leaping, running, ever closer, closer, they came. Someone screamed, "Shoot them, shoot them, Captain — *please!*"

Jory once more raised his hand. He had no idea how much force a flare-charge carried, or if he could hit his target. If he could at least knock one of the things off balance . . . he hefted his make-shift spear, sighted as best he could down the sightless barrel of the flare shooter —

— howling, running, scarlet —

"— *please* —"

— leaping, and in mid-air twisting, crumpling, falling, broken —

— one —

— and the other coming on —

— fired —

— down on one knee, back on one hand, thrusting, thrusting, scarlet gauntlet, black-palmed paw, thrusting now with both hands at the spurting smoke —

"One for each of us, Mister Cane," said the voice of Captain Rond. "Take this one alive. Smartly, now, men . . . smartly!"

It had the smoking flare caught up in one paw, paw waving and paw smoking, paw torn off. . . and then the men were on it, bringing it down, down, and Rond — "Alive! Alive! Not even hurt!" And Jory on it, too, staring into the hideous mask, circles, triangles, crescents, whorls and loops, scarlet, black, scarlet and black, black on scarlet; both his hands on it, knowing (somehow), though later knowing he did not know how he knew in that moment when there was no knowledge at all and only instinct —

— and pulled —

— the men yelling, the thing writhing —

— for one flash of a second his own head thrust up and seeing the horde pouring back over the crest of the hill and the other thing lying fallen and broken —

— and pulled — and pulled it off —

— and looked down into her face.

Her red-gold hair had come uncoiled. Her leaf-colored eyes stared at him. Her mouth had been bruised and a tiny trickle of blood ran from one corner.

Still Jory stared. Awkwardly he brushed with his sleeve at the blood.

Said Levvis, "What do you think, Mr. Cane? Little Joe's mother?"

"Sure looks like him," Mars said.

And Duston wondered aloud if she thought they were kidnappers. "No wonder they come after us like that. I don't blame them . . . now, probably the other kid gave the alarm."

And still Jory stared.

"We've got to get out of this." Captain Rond's voice was at his ear. "This is a very unpromising beginning. Tie the woman's hands, some of you. There — cut off those tapes on her . . . clothes? No: armor.

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Gently, gently. I want bounds, Storm, not tourniquets. Ah. Good. And now, where is the boy?"

Little Joe raised his head when they called to him. He had not been touched, apparently. He looked over the deserted field of battle, smoke, still rising black and thick; "*Ahhh . . .*" At sight of the dead warrior and "*Ohhh . . .*" at sight of the living one. She was on her knees now, not resisting being bound, no longer looking at Jory. Her eyes were on something else.

Jory followed them. There . . . lying on the ground . . .that shining thing she had so fiercely (he did not doubt, proudly, too) waved above her head in that wild and enraged attack. How it had glittered!

Her sword.

She spoke.

Difficult to credit that this same voice— clear, full, almost — one could say — civil — had uttered those wild howls.

She spoke, her head bowed down. Then she lifted it, spoke again, in obvious surprise. Little Joe came up to Captain Rond, took his hand, pointed to the sword. Then child and woman spoke together, but without looking at one another. Now she gazed at each of them in turn for a moment her look was scornful, then this gave way to confusion. She gave a gasp, then shrugged and once again bowed her head.

"I think," said Rond, slowly, "that I . . . or we . . . are supposed to do something about that sword. I know that swords were of great significance in pre-T times on our own Homeworld, but. . ."

The woman having finally mastered the notion that they did not really know what to do, she looked at Little Joe, and, with a sound too curt to be word, indicated him to show them. With gesture and with pantomime, but without ever touching the sword or any of her martial gear, the child directing.

Rond took it up with both his hands ("Rather a good steel, considering. . . I wonder if it might have been coked? If they know coal, they might know oil.") and plunged it into the ground. Upon the hilt they placed her mask and helmet, and layed her gauntlets, crossed, before it.

She looked on, nodding, with a deep sound, once or twice. Once or twice her face twitched. But that was all. Then she had them do the same for the sword of the dead woman — for woman was that one, too, older, gaunt and grim, gray in her russet coils, but woman. Dead.

Lockharn said suddenly, "Why, she don't care about the body at all. It's just the sword and gear she's worried about. I suppose it's their custom, but —"

Said Rond: "You may pray, if you wish, Systemsman Lockharn." He did not give him much time for it, though. He touched Little Joe's cheek, looked into his eyes and said, "What now? And where? But it must be quick."

Before the place was out of sight, Jory Cane turned his head to look. It seemed to him that two sentinels remained, heads alone protruding from the ground, heads bowed upon crossed hands.

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Once again Little Joe's grass buskins flew and they trotted after him. The woman made no resistance, her face showed no expression. Parts of her curious black and scarlet armor flapped loosely as she jogged along, where the tapes had been cut away to bind her hands.

They came upon a road paved with broad, flat stones, crossed it in a moment and plunged into the woods on the other side; but not before Jory had time to reflect that it must have been on here that the metal butts of the attackers' spears had been stamped. As though to confirm the source of the rythmic clangour, several of the spears lay where they had fallen . . . or been dropped. Other items of equipment lay scattered, but he didn't stop to examine them.

"Hey, look at this thing, Mr. Cane," Storm said.

"No time."

"All right. I've got it. Them. Look. What do you —?"

It took Jory a moment to identify the articles, even when he held them in his hand. One was a crossbow, rich in inlays of scarlet and black, with a touch or two of gold. The other was a leather pouch with tassels of the same two major colors. He squeezed it as he ran. "Pellets," he said. "I don't know what for."

"Change a letter or two," Rond said. "Bullets. It's a bullet-crossbow. They didn't all shoot darts . . . that's not the word . . . bolts. Or arrows. Give me one."

The pellets or bullets were of some dull gray metal, and seemed to have been cast in a mold. Rond, running as effortlessly as a man half his age, bit into it; held it up for Jory to see the marks of his teeth. "Lead. That could be useful, you know."

And then he said no more, but saved his breath. They rested once, they rested twice. Rond spoke into his pectoral, gave Crammer a brief report. Then they were off once more. Deeper, always deeper into the woods. And at the same time, always higher into the hills.

Animals — always six-legged — twittered or called or sang in the trees, or ran scuttling from their rushing feet into the underbrush. There was much thicket here, and no awks grazed to keep it down. Eventually they made their way single file along a narrow trail. And then even the trail faded out. There were fewer trees and more rocks, huge boulders of a glossy slate blue-gray, and once, but once only, something with six long and slender legs went leaping from rock to rock and dodged away from sight.

They were walking by that time, leaning heavily upon the hafts of their improvised spears. "I'm about bushed," someone muttered. And someone else said, "Look —" and pointed.

Two great broad bands of smoke ascended into the air.

"In *front* of us now. We must've circled around," Levvis said.

"'Spiraled' would be a better word. Let's get on. Oh — Mr. First, I think you might cut those tapes on the girl's wrists. I don't think

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she'll be giving us any trouble."

"Yes, Captain."

He unfastened his knife. She watched him as she came up, then, quite wordlessly, lifted her head, exposing her throat, and leaned forward. It was quite obvious that she expected to be killed.

"No, Sis," said Jory. "Not this time. And never by me." He cut her bonds, then cut off the tapes from each wrist. She gave a long, deep sigh, and he realized that she had been holding her breath.

On an impulse, he took up the severed tapes from where they lay on the blue-green moss, and awkwardly began to try to fasten her armor where it hung loose. But as soon as she saw what he was trying to do, she stopped him, turned around and indicated with her hands the bucklings and loopings of the entire suit. He could not manage. Obviously no one could get in or out of such a costume alone. He took the knife and slashed.

"There is no time for that now, Mr. First," Rond called from up hill. "Later — should she be willing — I have no objection."

Jory felt himself flushing angrily. And then just flushing. In a moment the ties were loose, and she stepped out of the armor, letting it fall. She had on a kilted robe something like Little Joe's, but of plain white, shorter, and corded round the waist. Not giving any further glance at her mail, she started up after the others. After a moment she looked back. Her green eyes seemed expressionless. He snapped his knife back onto its staff, and followed.

"A cave," said Rond. He seemed deeply disappointed. "Lower and lower. Troglodytes. This is not good."

Jory, still feeling irritable, said, "We haven't had any reason to expect a Guild-type installation, sir."

Rond did not reply. Slowly he sat down on the soft sand of the floor of the cavern. Slowly he drew open the power-pack in his emergency kit. "Which one of you has the therapy unit? Let me have it, Mars." He fastened attachments to the pack, to his pectoral, to his head, delved into the therapy unit.

Little Joe came and stood by him fondly, but Rond didn't notice.

"Wish you'd have a look at her mouth, sir," Jory said. "It's beginning to bleed again."

Rond grunted. "Let it bleed. This is more important. Maybe. If she is typical of her race, then language pickup may be of no use at all. Still . . . Bring her here, Cane."

What does he expect me to do — drag her? Cane's thoughts were sullen. For a moment he felt he could understand why Rond had lost his ship. He waved his hand toward Rond, touched her arm. Her skin was warm. Calmly and with dignity, she moved forward to an experience she could not have been expected to comprehend.

V

"It does not matter," she said. "Of course, I know how to use the bullet-bow. It's just a weapon. And this —" she gestured towards the brace of game grilling over the

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fire Little Joe had made and was tending — "this is just food. I haven't been used to eating, myself, the bag of the hunt. We hunted only for sport, threw the catch to the servitors. But now it's all different, you see. It doesn't matter.

"Nothing of that sort matters now . . ."

The firelight danced with ruddy shadows on her face. She had two or three of the lead balls in her hand. As she shook them together, absently, they rattled faintly, reminding Jory of the great war-rattle sounding — was it only this afternoon? It seemed long, long ago. Perhaps she, too, was reminded. She dropped the shots back in the pouch.

"Why doesn't it matter, Lady Narra?" asked Rond.

She put out her hand in a curious gesture. "Because," she said. "Because I am no longer a Great Woman. Because my sword is dead."

"Yes," said Little Joe, knees up to his chin, hands clasping legs. "Sword-Narra is dead. But, Madam . . . an honorable death and burial."

"Be quiet, child," said Rond.

"I am not a child, Father. I am a man."

Impatiently, "Yes, yes." To the woman, "I understand. We defeated your people and made you prisoner. So your sword is dead. I see."

Her hand sliced vertically across the air in the gesture they already had learned was negative. "No, you don't really see at all. It has nothing to do with their retreat. Sword-Narra touched the ground. It is dead, it is *dead*! I am not really even Lady Narra now, for I got name and title when I got Sword-Narra from the hands of my Dame. I was Maid Litha, then — before then. By rights I should be Litha again. Not even 'Maid' — just Litha. And even if I should ever get another sword . . . it is possible that I should. . . then I would be another person, with another name." Rond asked what the other name would be, and she made a slight, impatient gesture. "How can I say? Dame would consult the Elders and they would select the name."

Jory said, "The same name, then, for Lady and for Sword?"

Her look had something of surprise in it, and something of gratitude that he should understand. "Yes," she said. "The same name, for Sword and Lady are but two aspects of the same person. In a way it would be easier a second time. While my Sword was being forged, I was being trained. The training would be more difficult. Infinitely more difficult. It would be hard to find me a leader who would be willing to take on someone who had suffered her sword to die. Perhaps . . . perhaps some leader of the Border Marches, a remote and dangerous fief, short of warriors, where custom and discipline are less refined. I don't know. I don't know."

The fire was falling into embers. Most of the men, tired out by the long day's flight, had fallen asleep. Little Joe's eyes began to fall shut. He opened them now, with an effort. "You could become an outlaw," he said.

Her laugh was short. "Yes," she

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said. "I, who was a swordswoman of Dame Hanna herself, the High Keeper, I can become an outlaw. Plunder the trading merchants, rob the tax collectors, take tribute from the farmers. Live in this cave as I am sure other outlaws have. I could have looked forward, perhaps to my own fief some day — to glory, honor, husbands, and prettyboys. To daughters of my own.

"But — now?" She shrugged. Then some sudden thought tugged at a corner of her mouth. "Yes!" she exclaimed. "I will become an outlaw and live in this cave, and you, Rahan, whom the Giants call Little Joe, shall be my prettyboy! Or my husband, if you like," she concluded, *indifferently*. Obviously she was not serious.

And no wonder, Jory thought. Although from being an outcast to becoming an outlaw might not be a great step, still it was certainly a major decision; one which she could hardly take when the former status was still so new and fresh to her. How great an alteration in her life this day had made! In the morning she had been a warrior, a member of the leading class or caste, liegewoman to someone of obviously great importance. At noon she had set out with the other warriors of her outpost station to punish the strangers who had, the report said, attacked two awk-boys and kidnapped one of them. The afternoon was but little advanced when she found herself a prisoner, and her Sword "dead." Now she was, in terms of her own people, nothing and no one. To go back was impossible, to go forward — unlikely, at best. What then? Sideways? And, if so, in what direction and to what end?

She laid her head on her arms and looked long into the embers. Her hair was all fire, its gold tints, so plain in the sunlight, now subdued.

Rond's thoughts were different, direct. "Do you know of a dark oil which seeps from the rocks or the ground?" he asked. She shook her head curtly. He repeated his question to Little Joe, whose gesture of denial was mixed with sleep and wonder. "Or of any place of fires burning from the earth? Of bad air coming from the earth, bad enough to cause death?" No . . . neither of them knew of such things.

Then Rond asked, Who, in all their country, was likely to know of such things? Were there not those who studied old records, knew old accounts of strange things and unusual natural phenomena?

She sighed. "I studied war," she said. "I know nothing of these matters."

Little Joe's head nodded, then flew up. His eyes flew open. "Madam, the Great Father would know! At his court all such things are studied, are they not?" She gave a shrug. But Rond, bent on finding some clue, however slight, to sources of fuel, wouldn't let it rest. Jory wondered why he himself didn't share the same undeviating interest. Why was the question of returning not incessantly in his own mind? This barbarous world held nothing for him.

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Perhaps his very ability to consider the matter as the captain did was numbed, perhaps he was still in some measure suffering from the same sort of shock as the woman was. After all, wasn't there a resemblance? Weren't they all outcasts? He began to consider and reconsider his attitudes toward his career, toward the Guild: his life, in other words, for family — since his father's death — he had none. Nor had any of the many liaisons he had formed on the many worlds had been intermittently "home" proven permanent.

What had kept him, really, from throwing in his lot with the mutineers? Loyalty to the Guild? Hardly likely. That loyalty had burned hottest before he had entered the Third Academy, had not long survived the attitude of skepticism he had at first been shocked to find so prevalent there.

No. More likely it had simply been revulsion at the organized disorder of the uprising — Aysil Stone's drunkenness, the hard-core animality of Bosun Blaise Danley, the slow and brutal murder of Tarkington, the witless glee of the mutinous crew at the prospect of forever after living lives of ease in the Cluster on the proceeds of the sale of *Persephone*. These things, balanced against the still-unvexed and infinite calm of Captain Rond, had made his choice automatic. So much so that he hadn't even thought of it as a choice.

Till now.

If he had thought, in those few, frantic minutes when they were all rushed into the pettyboat much as other victims of mutiny, thousands of years earlier, had been rushed into longboats or made to . . . what was the expression? . . . "walk the plank" . . . if he had given one or two consecutive seconds' thought to his future, it would have been of a cramped but otherwise unremarkable voyage to the Spotting Station in sector C-2, a wait to be picked up by the Second Guild's relief ship, and — after some unavoidable lapse of time — a return to duty. He hadn't counted on the deviousness of the Captain's mind, sound and logical though the conclusions of that devious mind might in this case be. Now he found himself in a place so archaic that it had not even figured in romance for thousands of years. An outlaw's cave! Captor of some savage female, captive of her savage world, listening to the babblings, now, of a runaway herd-boy . . .

Boy?

Something, something was at the back of his mind, something at the tip of his tongue. If he could only concentrate (he hadn't realized the extent of his fatigue), only bring it up.

". . . and so King Takanahan said, 'My duties are too heavy for me, and it is too hard for men to rule—' " Little Joe was talking, had been doing so for some time, in a singsong tone which indicated, probably, the rote-recitation of old legend. "And so the Dame, Dame Boharra, said to the King, 'Great Father, retire to the Temple of the

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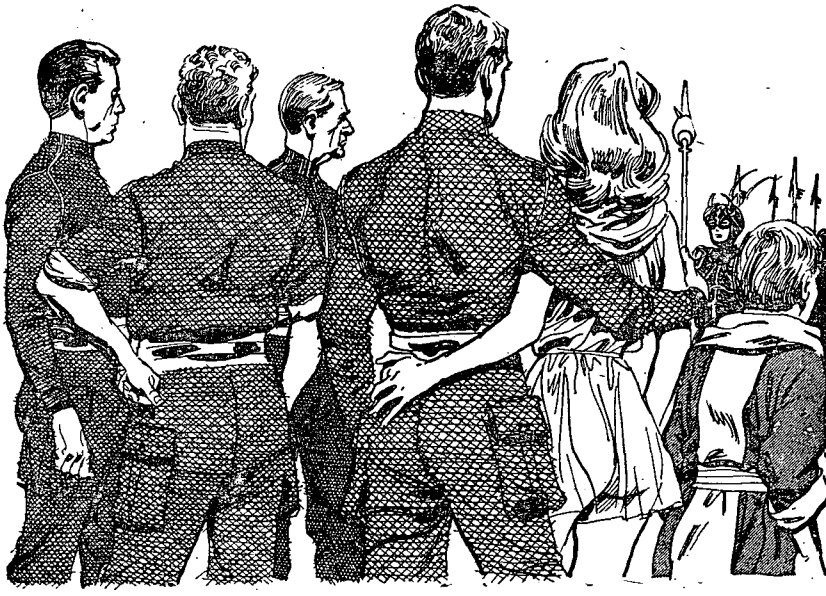

Clouds and give your days over to study and your nights to meditation, and I will keep your castles for you and I will rule in your name.' And King Takanahan said, 'Be it so.' And after that was no longer called *Ban,* but *O-Ban,* which means Once King. And his descendants still keep their court in the Temple. And Sept Sartissa, of which our Dame Hanna is head, keeps the *O-Ban*'s castles and rules in his name, the Great Father's name, the name of King Mukanahan. And he is so holy and secluded that he is almost never seen and he and all his court do nothing but learn of old things and wise things and answer prayer."

The sole remaining twig in the fire gave a sudden snap and a shower of sparks; then it too subsided into the dying bed embers.

Rond yawned politely. "Very interesting," he said. "Mr. First, I think we are all too weary to trust to live sentries tonight. Set the guard-wires and see that the fire is extinguished. Good night."

He took from his emergency kit the tiny packet which unfolded into his warmcloak. Jory started to his feet, stopped suddenly and said, "Sir —" Rond looked at him. He turned to the woman, who had neither moved or spoken. " 'Giants.' You called us giants."

Her head did not move, but out of the thickening darkness her voice said, "Warlocks, then. Great Men, if you prefer."

"But why 'giants?' We are no taller than you."

For a moment she stayed as she

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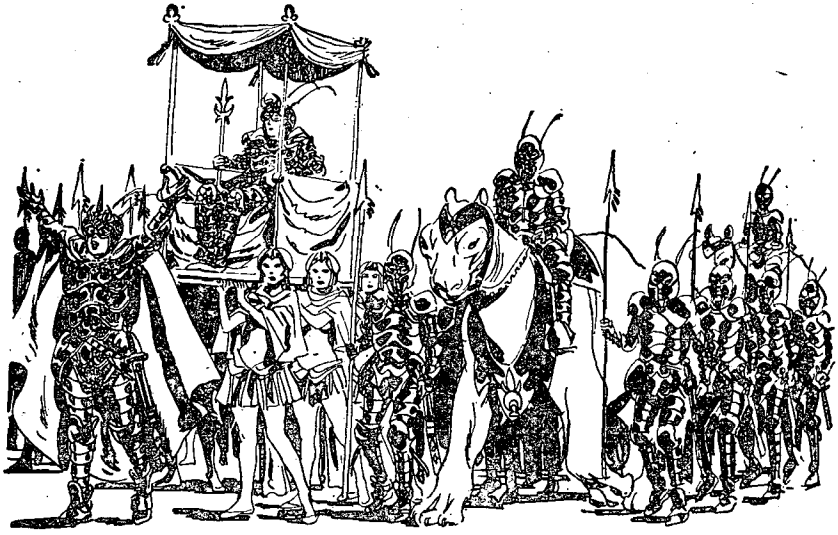

was, huddled and silent. Her face still invisible, her voice seemed to come from faraway. "Than me? I am a woman. At first I thought that you must be women, too. By your warlockry you made us of one speech, so I came to know that you were men. Men — warriors? Nowhere in all the Great North Land is there a thing like that. So I saw that you must be of the Great Men, who used to be among us in times past time. The giants. Compared to you, I am no more than one of our own men, compared to me."

He seemed on the very verge of full understanding, but the implications seemed impossible. Still, he had to find out. Only Rond, before he could, had made the connection.

Rond said, "Little Joe — Rahan, as you call him — is a man, then, and not a child as we thought?"

"As he told you, when you called him 'child'."

"Curious," murmured Rond. "Infinitely curious. One has observed such a disparity of size based on sex. There is nothing at all new in the fact, although it is more commonly the male who is in such cases so much the larger. Still, that the female should be twice his size is not altogether unknown. But I have never before seen — I have never before even heard of — such a circumstance in any human or humanlike race. No wonder you call us 'giants.' Good night."

Jory set the guide-wires, returned to find Little Joe brushing the fire into one pile, covering it with sand. Then, the last trace and

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glimmer of light extinguished, the small man lay down in the warmth where the ashes had been. In a moment his even breath was joined to the other sleepers'. Still Jory stood without moving.

At last she said, quietly, "Do you not sleep, Warlock?"

"Narra —"

"Narra is dead. It was you who killed her. It *was* you who fired the smoking brand which caused me to drop my sword?"

"Yes, Narra."

"Narra is dead."

"O-Narra, then."

She caught her breath. "Yes . . .I cannot be Litha again, any more than I can be a maid again. I will be O-Narra, as *Ban* Takanahan became O-Ban."

He knelt beside her. "The night is cold, the fire is also dead," he whispered. "My cloak is both wide and warm."

He felt her cold fingers on his face. "This afternoon I thought your knife intended my throat," she murmured. "I wished it so. Now . . . I I no longer wish it so. I do not know anything any more — except that I am cold, and not from the night alone."

Jory spread his cloak. And in the darkness he found her hands, and led her to it.

IV

Rahan-Joe had the fire going again when Jory awoke, though at first he did not see him. At first he looked only for the eyes of O-Narra, whose own eyes, wide and green, were looking into his when he awoke. They smiled at each other. She lightly brushed his lips with her fingertips, and he returned the gesture.

The other men had begun to stir, to wash at the trickle of water which came over the stone lip of a spring at the rear of the cave, and then — as Jory rose and helped O-Narra to her feet — he heard Rond say, "What are you doing now, my man."

"I am praying, Father. To King Mukanahan, the Great Father, the Holy King. This is our custom, morning by morning." He had scraped sand together in a little mound; then, going to a niche in the wall of the cave, came back with three small, chipped saucers, set them on the mound, knelt before it. In a low, clear voice, he prayed that all be well with the Great North Land and its Great Ladies . . . a pause . . . and with the Great Men newly come among the people . . . and that he, Rahan, whom the new Great Men had given the name 'Little Joe', might know neither sorrow nor sighing . . . and that he be given a good wife, and father many daughters . . .

From each of two of the saucers he took a pinch of some gray-white matter and sprinkled it on the fire. It flared briefly. Then he took a dark powder from the third dish, sprinkled it on the fire as well, and its strong scent came smoking up to fill the air.

In a low voice, Mars was saying, "Well, everyone to his own religion. My religion is not to have any."

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Rond smiled faintly and reached for his pectoral, probably to wave-in with Crammer, back at the pettyboat. Then, hand still on the cord, he said, "Salt and incense. Incense and salt. Ancient, ancient symbols, almost wherever one goes. Curious . . ." His hand moved, stopped again. "Now, why, Rahan-Joe, have you *two* plates of salt?"

The small man concluded his prayer and, about to return his humble sancta to their niche, held them out to the captain instead.

"Because, Father, they are two sorts of salt, both gifts of the first *Ban,* King Lakanahan, in the times before the times past time. One is the salt of the sea, the other the bitter salt of the desert. The salt of the sea preserves food and adds savor to it. And the salt of the desert —" Rond nodded, he had not really wanted much to know, plucked again at his pectoral communicator; but Rahan-Joe flowed on — "has the virtue that it cures bad water and makes it well again."

Once more Jory Cane saw the hand of Captain Marrus Rond loosen its hold. His head came slowly up, slowly around. He reached out his both hands, palms up. Something in his expression made Jory shiver slightly.

Rahan-Joe placed the saucers in Rond's hands. Rond looked at both. Then, slowly, he raised his hands and bent his head. He touched his tongue to one container. "Salt," he said. "Common salt." Then he tasted the stuff in the other. "Mr. First," he said. His voice was low, stifled. Then it rose, high, high, triumphant. "Mr. First! Do you know what this is? Do you know what this *is*? He let the salt-saucer drop unheeded, thrust the other towards Jory.

"We need no petroleum now!" he cried. "We have our exotic! Of course — I might have known — 'cures bad water!' Yes! It cures more than that! *It's Borax!* Do you hear, you men? Borax!"

Then his face became as calm as it was a moment ago. "Given but a little time and the equipment in the pettyboat, we can — with a reasonable amount of borax — make boron sufficient to get us off of here. We have our fuel, men — *we have our fuel*"

They did not give three cheers for borax and the Guild of the Third Academy. Storm said, "Well, I joined for adventure." Levvis said, "Well, I'll miss this place, kind of." Lockharn observed that he'd have to give the pettyboat's c.e. system "a good going over. It just about made it, this last trip, overcrowded as we were." Mars quoted the resigned summing-up of the longvoyageman — "'Oh, well . . . another day, another double-twenty . . .' Even if we don't draw special pay, we'll get to be somewhere we can spend what we do draw . . . I guess."

And Duston was more practical. "Where is this desert at, Captain?" he asked.

But Rond, at long last, had his pectoral in his hand, and was waving-in. *"Persephone* calling. *Persephone* pettyboat," he said, as he always did — as if he himself was

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the ship; as if there were anyone else broadcasting in all of Planet Valentine. Crammer made the ritual response and Rond, scarcely waiting for him to be through, said, "Coxswain Crammer, we've located a source of boron for solid fuel. Give the stillery a good going-over. We'll make alcohol if we have to boil every tree on the island! Then we'll head for the borax deposits. Over, out." Abruptly letting the pectoral drop, he said, "Let's go then. We'll eat our dense rations as we move. Lead on, Mr. First."

Jory, scarcely cognizant of his gesture, had taken O-Narra by the arm and was at the mouth of the cave when he stopped. After only a second or two, he asked, "Which way am I to lead, sir?"

Clasping on his kit, Rond said, "Why, toward the ship, of course. Coastward. Hadn't I made that clear?" He came up behind Jory. "Why?"

For answer Jory handed him his one-piece farseer. With a faintly annoyed noise Rond clapped it to his eyes.

His breath hissed. He handed it back and slowly shook his head. The stone-paved road they had so swiftly fled across the day before, road littered with the military debris of the flight of the armored host, this road was now revealed to be no short local by-path, but the main coastal highway itself. It ran roughly on a northeast southwest axis, by no means even at this elevation visible at every particular point of its generally visible route. It rode along the ridges and curved over the crests of the hills, vanishing from time to time into the hollows and the valleys. For one great length it passed in one great and shallow curve along a plain and then transversely through a huge walled city.

And wherever they looked the gray stone of the road itself was obscured with the lines of tiny figures — scarlet and black, black and scarlet — which moved continuously like lines of ants: northeast to southwest and into the city, southwest to northeast and into the city, through one great gate. Within the walls, the city seemed to boil with them. They filled the streets, they filled the enclosures, they poured into the large buildings and they poured out of them. And, eventually, forever, forever, with ceaseless endeavor, marched out of another great gate on the opposite side of the city — the gate which faced them as they stood, so very few, seeing but unseen, silent upon their mountain peak.

Scarlet, black, scarlet and black, the armored figures issued from this great gate and fanned out across the plain. It was a funnel reversed. Black, scarlet, black and scarlet, the army seemed to fill the plain. It had reached at least the foothills. At any moment Jory expected to see them come leaping, hear them come howling, over the lower summits. But all was silent, save for his own troubled breathing, and that of the others — for they had all by now observed the scene through their own farseers. The outcasts looked on with silent awe.

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O-Narra touched his hand. He handed the glass to her. She gave a faint cry. "Dame Hanna has raised the septs," she said. "She must have sent out couriers as soon as she got word. This has not been done before, not in my time, not for a hundred years. Or more."

She told him what must be going on in City Sartissa. The great gongs sounding without cessation. All common work stopped, all shops closed. Weapons and ammunition issued, rations and other supplies. Pack-trains assembled, to follow the troops. And, corps by corps and sept by sept, every group of warriors to the high command posts to receive their orders. And every group of warriors, sept by sept and corps by corps, to the temples to receive their oaths.

"What oaths?" Jory demanded.

"That they will suffer their swords to be buried and their bodies to be burned, if they return without their prisoners or their prisoners' heads."

Rond said something, but so softly that it was clear he spoke to himself alone.

Lockharn spoke musingly, almost pleadingly. "And yet, you know, it's such a beautiful day. And the scenery . . . everything all that sweet green with the touch of blue to it. I don't mean any of those folks the least harm in the world. All's I wanted to do was finish my tour, pension out and buy that farm. I never figured on mutiny or on war . . . This is a real pity."

Storm said, "Well, the real estate don't interest me, Locky, to be frank. I joined for adventure."

"You got it," said Levvis.

Rond spun on his heel. "Woman! Where is the desert where the borax — the salt — comes from? In which direction does it lie?"

She thought a moment, then her arm made an arc. "To the southeast, beyond the Hills of Night, which lie beyond the Dales of Lan, is the Desert of Bitter Salt. How far? I do not know for sure. But at least a ten-days' journey."

Rond sucked in his lower lip, passed a thin hand over his thin, grey hair. "If Crammer can distill enough liquid fuel by himself . . . He could bring the pettyboat to *us*, in the desert. Ten days . . ."

O-Narra said, "As to how far into the desert one must go to find the Lakes of Bitter Salt, again I do not know. Though I have heard a tale brought by a warrior who had heard it at the Holy Court during an annual Recongnizance there (for every manner of legend and relation and old daddy's tale is to be heard there — mind! I speak not of Great Father Mukanahan himself, the saint, the god — but, fact is fact, and a male court is bound to be feeble and decadent, amusing itself with fables and follies) . . . I lose my train of thought. For a moment I fancied myself mustering again, anointing Sword - Narra and touching her to the altar —"

Rond said impatiently, "Woman!"

She pressed her knuckles to her forehead. "How did the tale go? Once a rain wind blew into the inner dales through a pass in the Hills of Night. But King Lakanahan caused a wall to be built, to keep

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the rains on this side of the Great North Land, and so the inner dales dried up to deserts. One goes through that pass, climbs the wall, and, on the other side, makes smoke signals for the Wild Women of the Desert to —"

Rond sighed, deeply. "Fables, fables and legends. Even if true — smoke signals! For those savages to find us by? Northeast, southeast, woman, what lies southwest?"

Southwest lay nothing but scrublands, day after endless day, until the shores of the Silent Sea. There dwelt only a scattering of fisher-villages, so rude that they could build no boats, and lived by the scanty catch of their inshore fishing; so poor and mean were they that Dame Darra had levied on them a token tax to be paid in fleas!

"But," O-Narra said, "northwest—"

"Indeed! Indeed! Northwest?" demanded Captain Rond. "What lies northwest?"

She was evidently pondering, nodding her head, her mass of red-gold hair quivering in its loose gatherings, so different from the tightly-coifed way it had been but yesterday under the hideous battle-mask. "The High Keeper, Dame Hanna, will have alerted the Warders of the Border Marches by now," she said. "They have no septs among them, and still reckon descent by clans in the primitive manner; so each Warder holds his fief entirely at the Dame's pleasure. It is not to be expected that they will be as effective as the real warriors. Not for all the threats in the world, not for any sept city as fief, would they venture out at night, Father. They fear the darkness worse than death. So —"

She knelt on one knee and drew in the sand with her finger. Jory placed one hand lightly on her shoulder, bent to look. "We are approximately *here*. As Rahan guided us up, I daresay he can guide us down — by the yonder slope, of course. We are still a half-day's journey ahead of the Dame's true troops. Suppose we can reach *there*—" she drew a curling line, dotted her finger in the sand— "by nightfall. The River Lin. Its meadows will be empty at this time of year, the herdswomen will be up in the hills. We go by night as far as we can . . . say, to *here*. And —"

Rond interrupted her. "And where does all this *here* to *there* lead us, eventually."

She took hold of Jory's hand, pulled herself up. "To the Temple of the Clouds," she said. "To the Holy Court and— I hope — to sanctuary."

VII

Rahan-Joe had refused the chance to return to his household and his herd.

"Why should I return" his question was. "Before, I was happy, even though I was only a servitor. I used to dream dreams like all the others. 'Perhaps a Great Lady will pass by and see me and fall in love with me.' 'Perhaps I will find a treasure and be able to pick my own wife.'

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But, really, all the while I knew that sooner or later the bailiff would some day come and tell me that the awk-butcher or the soap-boiler had asked the Lady for a husband, and she had told the bailiff to find one, and *she* would pick *me*. Well, every man wants a wife. And if I got daughters enough mine might be kind to me."

They were making their way down a dry water-course. Boulders strewed the bed of the stream, making the going slow. Now and then a *tan* or *arptor* would startle them, the one with its swift and darting flight; the other with its shrill, questioning cry. Arp-*tor?* . . . Arp-*tor?* . . Arp-*tor?* The sun was hot and growing hotter.

"But now," he said, "I am a fellow of the Great Men. Children will know my name a hundred hundred years from now. Why should I go back?"

Levvis, his long legs scissoring their way around the huge, rounded stones, said, "I see what you mean, Little Joe. Well, if we get out of this, maybe we can take you with us. There's a place you never heard of — Humbolt's Two Worlds, in the Lace Pattern — where *no*body is bigger'n you are, men nor women. It's a nice place. Of course," he said, dodging around a boulder half the size of the pettyboat, "I guess this is a pretty nice place, too . . . or would be, if they had a more peaceful form of government."

The subject of the governance of the Great North Land was under discussion in officer's country, several paces behind, as well.

Jory said, "What do you think, Captain?"

Rond smiled wryly. "At this moment," he admitted, "I was thinking of a tall cold drink of greensleave. 'Spaceman's ruin' — eh? As a matter of fact, Aysil Stone didn't fall apart because he drank. He drank because he was falling apart. An ill-starred voyage, Cane; a bad smell to it from the start. However — well. I think that I don't care much for the prospect of walling ourselves up in the temple precincts with a clutter of barbarian philosophers."

The cliff fell away to one side at that point, leaving the whole country open to view for scores of leagues around. It was rugged terrain, with no sign of any of the cultivated fields visible in the earliest morning towards City Sartiscsa. It was woodcutters' country — minus the woodcutters. Far off across all but bottomless valleys with thin silver lines of streams snaking along them, on a jagged crest, they saw a ruined castle: snub tower and curving battlements. Properly supplied, properly armed, there in that relic of what Rahan-Joe and O-Narra called *ban-o-thy* — the "time of kings" — they might, few as they were, be able to hold off all the Dame's armies and all the Dame's women.

But they lacked both facilities.

"We'd be safe," Jory said. "Both of the Val people insist on that."

Rond compressed his lips. "I have come to be as fond of the small man as if he were my own son. And I am glad that you and the young woman are suited. *But,* Mister

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Cane, our object is not to be safe. We were safe on the island. Our object is to *get away*. And I don't think that will be easy whilst we are, so to speak, clutching the horns of the altar."

Jory wriggled out of his shirt, wiped his face with it, tied it around his neck. The land had begun to form a great series of shelves, like giant and crumbling steps. Down they went, carefully, carefully, carefully, down, down, down.

"Of course," said Rond, "I don't see that at the moment we have any choice."

Early afternoon brought them out of the rocks and sun and onto a wooded plateau.

"I think we might call a halt for rest and refreshment, Mr. First," said Rond. And then several things seemed to happen at once. A creature of some size came loping out of the trees diagonally across their path. There was a shout. A thud. The beast stumbled, rolled over, lay still. Someone cried, "Oh, good, Moha!" The same voice said, almost at once, in an entirely different tone of voice, "Lady-Narra!"

A small man in a flowered kilt held out his hands, then, more in bewilderment than fear, let them fall. O-Narra said, in a careful voice, "Lord Clanan."

He stared, open-mouthed. Then his eyes observed Jory's naked chest. He flushed, put his hands to his mouth. "Men" he said in sudden terror.

And three women all bearing crossbows, came strolling out of the woods.

Lady-Moha, her principal husband, Lord Clanan, and two of her younger friends — Lady-Sarra and Lady-Jerra, — were on a weeklong hunting trip. Their retinue was, by choice, small. The cares of Fief-Moha had been too much on its Lady's mind, and her husband had persuaded her to advance their annual holiday by three weeks, and to reduce its party's size.

They had been here now for three days. Hunting was good, Lord Clanan played the traditional music of the Vales of Lan (his original home) on the five-stringed *gor*, the Ladies sang. Maid Thila, the infant heiress to Fief-Moha, slumbered in her cradle.

Rahan-Joe tactfully parted from his new friends, and went to be of use to the servitors. The sudden appearance of seven guests was perhaps not balanced by the equally sudden appearance of one thrall, but the retinue —torn between the problem of making the food and table-settings go almost twice more, and the irresistable desire to see the Giants— made little complaint.

The members of the hunting party rose as well to the occasion as could be expected. Indeed, Jory thought to himself, better. Observing Lord Clanan's courteous attentions as he directed his manservant to lay out soap and towels and water, he wondered if he himself would be able to keep from staring if seven strange men, twelve feet tall, came to call on him. He decided that he would have had a difficult time to keep from running like hell. The female members of the

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party, with an outward calm they could hardly be feeling at heart, politely discussed the journey hither from Fief-Moha, the details of the hunt and similar small talk with O-Narra as she made her own toilet.

They never alluded by word or glance to her informal attire and appearance.

Not until the meal was over ("Excuse the informality," said Lord Clanan, with every appearance of sincerity, waving his hand in deprecation towards the ornately set table, the elaborate garb of the servitors; "it's one of the advantages getting off into the woods that much ceremony can be dispensed with."), did anyone bring up what must have been in most minds.

"Now there must be speech," said their hostess simply.

O-Narra nodded. "Sword-Moha has had the honor," she said, "of being the first to give food to the Great men, newly come once more to the Great North Land."

"I thought as much," Moha said. She, her husband and Lady-Sarra, bowed themselves down at once; Lady-Jerra, more slowly. This last, as she straightened before the three others, put a question.

"Why does Sword-Narra wear armor-clothes, but no armor?"

In clipped tones came the answer. "Sword-Jerra does not as yet know the customs of greeting the Great Men" — which was incontrovertible — "but I shall presently share with her what little knowledge has lately been taught to me" — which had to be swallowed.

"Do let us not be so courtly and formal," Lord Clanan begged. "Unless," he said, uncertainly, "such is the proper custom. In which case . . ." His voice ended on a troubled note.

"The custom which Lord Clanan has kept at this first meal," O-Narra said, "is proper, and henceforth will be known and taught in the name of Lord Clanan." The little Lord's rosy face beamed, his wife looked infinitely honored, Lady-Sarra seemed greatly impressed, and Lady-Jerra . . . at least kept silent. Moha and Sarra were big bulks of women, though they moved with an ease which bespoke practice and exercize; Jerra was thinner, bony, sallow.

The silence was long. Had it not been for Jerra's sour presence, Jory might have said it was luminous.

At length Moha spoke. "When I was very young I remember my old grandfather telling me of the times before time, when the Great Men were in the land. Of course, he told me many things which one might say were nothing but old daddy's tales — sword - daemons, were-*tans*, nightleapers and such-like. But no one has ever denied the tales of the Giants, the Great Men. I mean, if such a thing had not been true.

Her husband clapped his hands. "And to think that we are privileged to live in the days of the return of the Great Men! And to have given them our food for their first meal! The children of our children's children will tell of this!"

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Rond shifted slightly in his place, whispered to Jory Cane, in Inter-Gal, "Will you take a look over the terrain with your farseer?" Jory nodded, rose.

But he had not counted on custom, curiosity and Lord Clanan. Lord Clannan immediately rose, too — and so did his wife and her Lady guests. Jory smiled, moved off to the highest point near to hand. So did everyone else. And there, before he could think what else to do, Jerra squinted — frowned — pointed.

Jory had not counted on such clear vision. He himself could see nothing until he lifted his glass, but Moha at once exclaimed, "A courier! See the white band on her helmet! I wonder what — It must be for me. It will be hours before she can get here." Her finger pointed far down into the depths of land.

It was O-Narra who spoke.

"I can tell you what tidings the courier brings," she said. Moha swung around, her face eager, wondering. "It is only the formal confirmation of the tidings *I* bring. Fief-Moha, kneel."

And while Moha obediently knelt and the others drew back, O-Narra said, "The Dame, the Great One, Hanna, High Keeper of the Castles of the *O-Ban*, bids you conduct at their pleasure the Great Men to the Temple of the Clouds, and be their guide and guard until relieved of such task by the Holy Presence Himself. She has said it."

Maha bowed her head to her knees. Then, assisted by Sarra and Jerra, she rose.

"What is the pleasure of the Great Ones? When shall we break camp and be off to the Holy Court of King Mukanahan?"

For the first time Rond spoke to her. He flung out his hand in a wide, sweeping gesture. *"Now!"* he said.

VIII

Against the feet that the courier, her fantastic and barbarous war mask topped with a knot of white cloth, was making her way up-slope, while the rest of them were heading down, there had to be balanced the fact that they were burdened with baggage and gear — plus Lord Clanan's palanquin. It would be a near thing, much too near for comfort.

"Should we leave one of our men behind to kill the courier?" Jory inquired, as hasty preparations for breaking camp were made.

O-Narra considered briefly. Then, "No," she said. "Your man might never find us. We'll have to try to decoy her . . . Ho! Lady-Moha! A note for the courier — shall I take care of it for you?"

"My thanks, my thanks!" Moha called, hastily, her full face redder than usual. Red — except for one scar which stood out whitely, gotten, O-Narra told him later, during one of the periodic feuds which were both encouraged and strictly controlled by the Keeperate as a means of maintaining the warrior class in martial spirit and practice.

In only a few minutes they were off, at an easy trot, a cleft stick with a streamer attached to it thrust into the ground and the note slipped

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in it. Rond grumbled. "Surely we can go faster than this?"

"Yes, but we could not keep it up," O-Narra pointed out. "Believe me, this pace is best." To Jory's inquiring look she replied that, while the courier might think it odd that the party was heading back for Fief-Moha so soon, it would not occur to her that she was being deceived. "Undoubtedly, she will try and save time by going cross-country to the road, thinking to meet us there. And she will wait. How long, I don't know. But long enough."

The courier, then, represented potential rather than an actual, present menace. There was no lack of the latter. There was no way of telling whether they would be able to make it to the royal precincts, within which no sword was allowed, no creature ever put to death; from which no one seeking sanctuary was ever expelled. Soldiers of the septs might cross their path from the east and — since it was not possible, without betraying themselves, to persuade Moha to travel by night — there was an almost equal danger from the Border forces so soon as word should reach them to mobilize.

Meanwhile, with enforced appearance of calm, they trotted at an easy pace through the peaceful countryside. Their route was on a downward grade still, but would not always remain so. Once, as they paused on a bluff for refreshment and relief, O-Narra pointed. "Jory — look."

He looked, but not, at first, where she had pointed. He looked at her. This was the first time she had addressed him by name. Moha had lent her one of the green hunting-costumes which she and Sarra and Jerra wore. Jory now observed that it deepened the green of her own eyes. She caught his look, flushed slightly, but her smile did not change.

"See there," she said, pointing.

Long away and down a great stream curved in an ox-bow. A thin thread of smoke rose from an island, and a line of sailing barges floated restfully against the slow current.

"The River Lin. And there are the meadows where I thought we would hide. We won't hide, now."

"Suppose we are overtaken?"

"We would have to be overtaken by the Dame herself before Moha would allow her guests to come to harm."

Preparations for resuming the journey were being made with less speed than Jory found comfortable, when Jerra raised her hand for silence. After a moment, Sarra asked, "What do you hear?"

"I thought . . . I am almost sure . . . a war-rattle."

Jory tensed. O-Narra laughed. "Was this what you heard, Lady-Jerra?" She shook the pouch of bullets at her belt. Sarra chuckled. Jerra looked unconvinced.

Rond said, "I am eager to look upon the face of the Holy King." And, indeed, he did look eager — as he, as all of them, Jory thought, had every right to look.

Hastily, apologetic, Moha said, "Pardon our delay, Father. Ho! We move on!"

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As the bearers swung up Lord Clanan's palanquin, the infant in his arms, and all resumed the journey, the little Lord called out, "Moha, wasn't there talk, before we left, that the bad feeling between Fief-Lanna and the Heiress of old Manna might break out into an open feud."

Moha, trotting by her husband's side, exclaimed. "It might be so! Perhaps Jerra heard —"

Jerra's thin, sour face broke into a thin, sour smile. "It might be so," she repeated Moha's words. "And if it is —"

O-Narra broke in. "It would be a shame if this journey were disrupted or delayed for any reason. We know how loyal Lady-Jerra is to her friends, but the Heiress herself would understand your sacrificing this chance to engage Sword-Jerra in the conflict." The other two women matter-of-factly urged the same course, Sarra suggesting that the Old Sword would probably sue for peace as soon as a token fight had cleared her daughter's honor. Jerra nodded, rather reluctantly, and no more was said.

It seemed to Jory that O-Narra now shook her pounch of bullets rather more often than it would have normally. A real war-rattle would have to be very near and very loud to make itself noticed.

But when the danger actually came, it came unheralded.

They had left the roughlands and come down to foothill country. The sun was declining, the old road was smooth, the air cool. No directive had been given but the pace had slowed. All were tired.

Rond should have liked to push on through the night, but Jory advised against it. "Let's not press our luck too far," he said. "As things are now, Moha is our greatest resource. It wouldn't do to make her suspicious. Or, more to the point, to make Jerra suspicious, and spoil the atmosphere. These things tend to be contagious."

Reluctantly, Rond agreed.

And then, where the road seemed to give itself a slight heave as if to gather strength for passing through a defile, a group of people suddenly appeared. Moha's party stopped abruptly. Moha muttered. Her hand went towards her left shoulder, where the hilt of her sword rested, bound in a green ribbon to indicate a peaceful mission. But the sword remained slung across her back and the hand stayed at her bosom. Moha might be slow, Jory noted — as he noted, too, that they were well out-numbered — but she was no fool. And, unless Moha drew, it would be bad manners of the worst sort for either of the other warriors to draw. Still, it was with no pleasure that he drew near the group which barred their way.

Several women of the group wore armor, but it lacked the natty look of warrior armor. Too, the circumstance of its being all black, without a single trace of scarlet, gave a somber air to the outfit. Neither did he see a single sword, although the new arrivals were by no means disarmed. The armored women carried weapons something between a

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cutlass and a machete; the others had pikes with rather sharp-looking edges.

But the blades were sheathed, the pikes carried points down.

One of the women, her hair, like the others', cut short and close, came forward. In her hands was a leafy branch.

"Is it peace, Moha?" she asked, in a husky voice.

Stiffly Moha said, "You know there is no peace with outlaws, only truce." She moved slowly to the side of the road and, without taking her eyes from the outlaw, broke off a branch from a bush. Jory heard O-Narra release her breath in a long sigh. Everyone seemed to relax.

"Truce, then," said the outlaw. Ignoring the warriors, she fixed Rond with a bold look, which traveled from one to another of the *Persephone's* men, finally coming to rest on Jory. "My name, Giant, is Nelsa. We heard that you were hereabouts, and came to see for ourselves."

Jory bowed slightly and said nothing. It would have been foolish for them to have assumed that they could move even through wild country without being observed at all. And then, too, rumor must have spread more swiftly than the couriers. He noticed how the three warriors and all the servitors had gathered around the palanquin in which Lord Clanan and the child sat silently. His own men, with O-Narra and Little Joe, were grouping alongside him and Captain Rond.

Said Moha, in a low voice which did not tremble, "I warn you, Nelsa, that we are travelling on the Dame's orders, taking these Great Men to the Holy Court. Do not interfere."

Nelsa nodded casually . . . almost indifferently. She flicked her branch of leaves towards Moha, but her eyes never left Jory.

"The Holy Court. That's good. The people of the forest, Giant, have never set themselves against the King. Why should we? He's a god. But now, it seems . . . perhaps there may be new gods in the land." Jory saw Sarra and Jerra snap their heads back. Sarra frowned. Jerra's mouth curled open in an ugly grimace. There was a movement among Moha's servitors, but a quick glance from her quelled all open thoughts of violence.

"The Dame, says Moha, is sending you to the Temple. Well, Moha's a woman of honor. She wouldn't lie. But maybe the Dame hasn't taken Moha all the way into her confidence. After all, the Dame has nothing to gain by new gods in the land when she and all the Keepers before her have had the old gods walled up, safe and sound. All sorts of things have been happening, Giant, today and yesterday. The two Swords over there seem worried. Maybe for good reason. What do you say, Giant?"

Jory waited for someone to give him a lead. The blue air thickened into early dusk. The warriors were silent, O-Narra looked aside to him in a look of pure question and Rond stared at the ground.

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Jory took in a deep breath of the clean, cool evening. Nelsa plainly was no fool, either. Her eyes were fixed on him. He was not at all sure of what she wanted, except that she probably wanted *him*, but he was reasonably sure that she wanted more than that.

"I say what Lady-Moha says. And I say this, too: Come with us. At the Holy Court no harm can come to any, and there questions will be answered." As he spoke Jory stared at Nelsa.

Nelsa thrust her lips out a little, asked, "What does Moha say now?"

Moha plainly would have liked to say much. But Lord Clanan, in the palanquin, shifted slightly, and the baby let out a faint little cry. "Be it so," said Moha.

There was a movement among the black-clad outlaws. One of them moved forward, disclosing that it was a black robe and not a coat of mail that she wore. Jory realized with some surprise that this was the first *old* woman he had seen. And Nelsa asked, "What does the priestess say?"

The old woman nodded her head several times, then began to speak in the same sing-song tone in which Little Joe, Rahan, had recited his old tales to Captain Rond. *"The great bird slays her dam,"* she quavered, *"Heaven and Earth burn, the Great Men dwell in the Land, ruling in equity . . ."* Her head nodded and nodded. It was undoubtedly a quotation.

"Be it so," said Nelsa. "We'll camp here. There will be no fires tonight."

That night, having set the guard wires, Jory went to have a final word with Rond. He hoped, he said, that his suggestion about the outlaws had been the right one. "At least, sir, we now have more of the Val people on our side."

But Rond seemed both tired and petulant. It came as somewhat of a shock for Jory to think, *He's aging.*

"It's just so many more people to slow us down, Mr. Cane," Rond complained. He listened finally to what Jory had to say about the Holy King. Jory thought the King, Mukanahan, might be an answer to their problems. Suppose they were — somehow — to hold him as a hostage. Wouldn't the Dame, or the Keeper, or any indigenous group or person, be willing to ransom him with borax — and time to make boron?

To the captain's objection that the King was only a figurehead, Jory countered that therein lay the whole point: he was a *sacred* figurehead! A ruler was sure to have enemies. Suppose they captured Dame Hanna? The result might well be only a palace revolution, or the uprising of some rival sept, setting or aiming to set in power another Dame. But the king, who reigned *without* ruling, had no enemies — had never had the opportunity to make any. His person was holy, he was a saint, a god. No desire which anyone of the Val people could have to see *Persephone's* people punished could equal their desire to see their Holy King release.

"It seems like a crack-brained scheme to me," Rond said, getting

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out his warmcloak. "And I tell you what — we've got to pay more attention to the terrain. Keep an eye out for shale, for sandstone or limestone. No reason why petroleum deposits shouldn't have formed on this planet."

"But, sir —"

"No reason at all. Good night."

O-Narra said, "I wasn't sure you'd come." To his surprised, *Why?* she made one of those indeterminate little noises peculiar to women, caressed his face with her fingers. "Nelsa was looking at you," she murmured at last. Jory laughed and spread the cloak around them.

But the last voice he heard that night was Nelsa's, after all.

Clear and unmistakable it came through the darkness. "Dam?" she was asking someone. "Dam — or *Dame?* Who knows . . ."

Who indeed, Jory thought sleepily.

IX

At first he thought it was a drop of rain on his face, and moved to pull the cloak closer. His eyes opening, he realized that it was only dew.

The time must be earliest morning. The light was muted and dim and the air gray. The trees shimmered and looked ghostly. A smell of woodfires and food reminded him of last night's cold supper and of stumbling around in the darkness. Nelsa's directive had been a sensible one, but it would be little if any more comfort to be overtaken in the daytime. While he mused, he came suddenly aware of voices — a hum of voices, far too many voices for the twenty or so of his and Moha's party and the fifty-odd of Nelsa's.

O-Narra was still asleep, her hair looking ashy-blonde in the half light. Gently, he drew apart, tucked the cloak in around her and stood up. At once the voices rose to a shout and abruptly died away.

They were surrounded.

There must have been close to two hundred of them, and almost all were men. The noise awakened one of the crew — Levvis, it proved — and when his long figure popped to its feet, there was another shout. It was not long before everyone was awake. The small men came, fearfully at first, cheerfully before long, flocking around the big ones. Awe was on their faces as they touched their taller brothers. At first too shy to speak, they found their tongues soon enough.

"Men!"

"Great Men!"

"The old daddy's tale was a true one — see! Giants!"

Then they were falling back, stumbling over one another in alarm. Jerra came striding through the throng, almost running, one hand laid threateningly on her sword-hilt, the other hand knocking the frightened men aside. Her face, ugly even in repose, was not quite hideous in rage. She shook her fist. "What have you brought among us, Narra!" she shouted. "Anarchy? Rebellion? Treason?"

Accusations poured from her. She almost frothed at the mouth.

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Every man-servitor for miles around must have left his mistress — and even some of the women, more shame to them. What would be the result if men left their labor, fled from their kitchens, abandoned their flocks, deserted their husbands? If servitors of either sex felt free to ignore their tasks?

"Heaven and Earth tremble!" she concluded with a shriek.

"I do not feel them tremble," said O-Narra calmly. And while Jerra stood there, shaking in fury, she turned to the men who had retreated to a safe distance. "Here are the Giants," she said. "You see them — the Great Men. They cannot talk now with every one of you. Be sure they wish you well. And now —"

She was about to ask them to return, but Jory stepped up beside her. "And now," he said, "give no cause for offense, but wait quietly till we have washed and eaten and begun our journey to the saintly King. And then, still quietly, come with us on our pilgrimage." There was an instant's stunned silence. Then another shout went up.

Bowing, faces glowing, the small men retreated. What, exactly, they had had in mind, Jory did not know, but that more than a quick peek and then a return to the old order was involved was obvious. The men had brought food, bedding, wood and small stoves, walking-staves, new clothes, children, pet animals. In another moment the sound of their prayers and the smell of their incense filled the air.

In less than half an hour the procession moved off.

It never ceased growing. At least two and fragments of several other outlaw bands joined it; wandering and non-wandering clerics of both sexes, widowers and orphans, peasants, woodcutters, workers. There was one bad moment. Jory, coughing a bit from the dust which the (by now) more than one thousand feet had raised on the road, looked up to see the hideous scarlet and black battle-mask of a warrior next to him. But in a moment the mask was thrown back, and the face beneath it showed only awe and curiosity.

"Ho! Giant!" the woman cried. "Have you heard anything of slavers raiding near the coast?" He shook his head. "I am Fief-Darna — the smallest fief in the Land," she said, with a laugh. "Word reached me that the Dame had raised the Septs to punish those rogues. I am on my way to bring Sword-Darna to her. Holy King! What an Army you have with you! Your dust alone would smother the slavers!" And, with another laugh, and a friendly wave of her arm, she was gone. He wiped his face on his sleeve.

Once, too, Nelsa spoke to him. "I have had husbands in my time," she said; "both as an honest woman and as an outlaw. Husbands and prettyboys. Some were nothing. Some — I thought — were real men. But now I see I never knew what real men were. There are fewer and fewer men-children being born, did you know that? Many poor women never marry. But the Great Ladies, the rich, those in high places, they have all the men they

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want; the Dame herself has always a hundred — one goes, another comes. Between them they have given her six children, four of them girls... Why should she have so many, and others none? Many women ask these questions. Narra — she was once a Sword, wasn't she? And now she's your woman?"

He met her frank question with a level look. Narra... At first she was merely a woman to him. She was already more than that, how much more he was not sure. He *was* sure that some kind of an offer was being made him now. And the odd thought occurred, what would Jerra think of such an innovation as polygamy in place of polyandery?

"Well, well," said Nelsa. "We shall soon be at the Holy Court, where —as you said — 'questions will be answered'."

From time to time Jory scanned the landscape with his farseer, partly to carry out Rond's orders, partly to make sure the pursuit hadn't reached them yet. *"Slavers"* — did the Dame believe that? The dust made it hard to see anything; he took advantage of a rest stop to climb a low hill for better view. He did not tarry long.

O-Narra looked up in surprise as he took her arm. "Who rides in a white palanquin?" he asked, urgently.

"Only the Dame," she said. "Why?" Then she went pale. Her hand, gesturing at the farseer, trembled slightly. "Did you see that... with this?"

He nodded. The throng buzzed happily along like a swarm of insects, Rond and his men in the midst of them. How fast could they go, if they had to? And what sort of show of resistance could they put up? "Yes," he said. "On the road below... And what seems like every sept in the Land behind her."

The wall making the boundary of the Holy Court lay downhill, an ancient and ornate gate coming in and out of their view as they all but tumbled down the spiral roadway. They were approaching it from above; the Dame and her forces, from below.

Whether her intention was purely a tactical one— to cut them off — or whether she had a purpose of her own inside the Temple precincts, Jory did not know. He knew only that they had to get there first.

Others must have sighted the white palanquin, rushing up the road on the shoulders of its fifty bearers, surrounded by the Corps of Guards, with Sept Sartissa right behind them; and behind that (O-Narra began to name them), Septs Boulbissa, Marnicca, Tarntissa; Ro'issa, Novissa, and Harn; the two Moieties of Larn; then Verdanth, Saramanth, Toranth... The names vanished into an obscurity of exotic syllables.

But others must have sighted them, too.

A ripple went through the throng, then something like a shudder. It stopped, moved back, moved forward, began to eddy. Jory moved rapidly. "Ho! he shouted. "Ho, and ho!" Every eye turned to him. "The Dame comes to meet us! We must

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not tarry! Ho! Ho!" And he ran forward.

It was contagious. Men and women, young and old, they ran after him, O-Narra by his side. Over his shoulder he shouted, "*Persephone!* To me!" One by one, they caught up to him — tall Levvis, Little Joe riding on his shoulders, young Storm, Old Lockharn. Mars, Duston, Rond.

"What do you intend by this, Mr. First?" Rond demanded, panting.

But Rond got no answer, was carried along more by momentum then zeal. The Dame had remembered — or had known — only part of the old maxim which said that a good leader should always be at the head of the troops but a good leader should always be behind the troops as well. It was, after all, a rather difficult maxim to carry out, and pre-eminence was not a habit easily relinquished. Nor was respect and discipline — her troops remained behind her. The palanquin, white upon white, moved swiftly; the scarlet and black masses behind it kept right up with it; but Jory and his undisciplined horde moved even faster.

He could see the erect figure on its seat, could see its mouth open and moving, but no word could be heard above the wordless shouting of the pilgrimage throng. The mob flowed across the path of the troops. And then, as Jory had known it would, had known it must, the mob ceased in one instant to be a mob, and fell on its knees.

Bearers and troops stopped abruptly. The bearers could not pass through the tight-packed genuflecting mass, the troops could not outflank the palanquin. Rond turned to look, stumbled. Jory put one arm around his captain's waist, one arm around O-Narra's.

And so the people of the *Persephone* passed through the gate and into the precincts of the Holy Court . . . and sanctuary.

The meeting with the Dame seemed, after that, an anticlimax.

There was no precedence for such a meeting, the wrinkled little chamberlains assured Jory and Rond. It should have been an audience, but the High Keeper could have no audience in the Holy Court with anyone but the King Himself. Still, still, the High Keeper had insisted, the Great Men had insisted. Very well, be it so. A meeting, then.

The troops had withdrawn; it could hardly be permitted to give the appearance of blockading or besieging the Holy Court. The High Keeper had, as always, dismounted and walked through the gates, followed by an empty palanquin bearing an empty scabbard. Sword-Hanna rested in the keeping of her chief Lieutenant; Dame Hanna, here at least, in theory at least, was merely the chiefmost of King Mukanahan's subjects. No building near the gate being suitable, they met in the open.

The Holy Presence was not present, but Hanna was very, very much present. Guild Captains might have learned from her the meaning of *command*. A small motion of her

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hand, a small movement of her eyes, said, plainly, Speak. And Rond spoke. It was a long, rambling address, in which were mingled respects, apologies, the power and potencies of the Guild, mutiny, borax, reward, trade, treaties, alcohol and regret.

Jory wondered how much she understood of it all.

There was a silence. The Dame was a woman of stately and vigorous appearance, with dyed hair, her armor so worked with gold as to allow only a hint of scarlet or black to show through. She gazed through everyone. Then she spoke. "You wish to leave? Very well. Leave . . . You have safe conduct to the coast."

Rond blinked. "But . . . Madam . . . the borax? The bitter salt of —"

Her mouth twitched. "'Great Men,' indeed! Warlocks! What warlockry do you plan with the bitter salt? Or rather what lies do you tell me about it? Did you need come here — *here* — to find it? When every household shrine and shop has it?"

"There was no time, Madam. Your troops attacked and pursued us."

The fairly obvious truth of this seemed to affect her, but only for a moment. Then she burst out again at him. "Who raised this rabble? You! Who has upset, in two days, the settled ways of centuries? You! The servitor eyes his mistress's goods, the peasant lusts for his lady's lands, the men aspire to seize the rule from women, the outlaw thinks to become a law herself. And who has done this? *You!* As I knew from the start you would. Attacked? Pursued? Of course! Certainly! Would that you had been seized and slain that first day. *Great Men!* What greatness can there be to men?"

Rond blinked. And Jory said, "The longer we stay, the wider will spread the unrest our coming has brought. Give us what we ask, and we will go."

She stared at him, grim. "How can I believe it?"

"What other choice have you?"

Her white, strong hands clenched. "Are there any more of you? Have you any ships besides the one you spoke of?"

"To both questions, Madam, no."

She considered. She seemed to relent, then repent, then to waver. And then the noise, that well-remembered, utterly familiar noise, broke upon their ears like roaring thunder.

Every eye went up. After the first emotion, Jory's feeling was paradoxically one of admiration for the Dame. When all, including O-Narra, had after one terrified glance, fallen on their faces — bearers, chamberlains, pilgrims, all — Dame Hanna remained standing and unafraid.

One word she said to him. *"Liar."* And then with deliberate speed she was striding to the gate.

Almost reluctantly, he tore his eyes from her, returned them to the southwestern sky where, glittering like an only somewhat lesser sun, the great ship descended from the heavens.

It was Rond, appropriately, who broke the silence.

"Persephone!" He said.

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The effect of hearing their god giggle proved so unsettling to the chamberlains that the Holy Presence dismissed them with a wave of his hand — and another giggle.

The little King was a middle-aged man with unexpectedly shrewd eyes. The giggles were merely his reaction to a situation which was totally unprecedented but by no means unpleasant.

"Pardon my amusement," Mukanahan said. "This is the first time I have ever met anyone outside my family without ceremony, and I find it unsettling." The giggle changed to a chuckle. "Her Valor, the Dame, High Keeper of my Castles — in other words, that tiresome woman, Hanna — thinks you must come from some of the lands far to the south. Nonsense."

Rond gave a tired smile. "Where does your Holy Highness think we come from?" he asked.

The shrewd eyes gave him a shrewd look. "Why, from the stars, of course. Thence came the Great Men of old. And thence, I think, came all of us. What do you want with desert salt?" he asked abruptly.

Said Rond, "To make fuel for our ship, so that we can leave your world."

Mukanahan sighed. "Scarcely come, already wanting to leave. Well, well. We have a warehouse full of it, but Hanna won't let you get very far. Patience. The Great Men in this new skyship . . . they are not of your people, I think?"

"No longer. But how —"

Amusement vanished from the keen little face. "How do I know? Because you are obviously not murderers, and they obviously are." He got up. "We must talk further. Meanwhile, you are my guests." He nodded, and was gone. Equerries appeared almost at once and conducted them, not to the pavilion where they had been briefly staying, but to an extensive building which was now hastily being set to rights by a small army of scurrying servitors.

A white-haired small man in the blue livery of the Holy House introduced himself as Sire Jahan, the Chief Equerry "I address myself to — *Captain* Rond? and *First Officer* Cane? I am honored. Alas, we have no clothing to fit you, but tailors will arrive shortly to take your measures. Some slight refreshment is ready now —" he gestured to a line of servitors setting tables—" and food is presently being prepared. Baths also are being arranged. And the Great Father has asked me also to keep you constantly informed of news as it comes in."

"News?" — Rond.

"Of the Dame?" — Jory.

Sire Jahan bowed. "Of the Dame, yes. And also of the thefts, the burning, slaughter and rapine now being committed by the Great Men who are your enemies."

The entire policy of the Keeperate had been, through the centuries, to keep the Kingship isolated as much as possible from the real life of the Land. The Holy Court was not to be bothered by

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such things. It was to be venerated, antiquated, intimidated, de-animated, and incapacitated, so as to remove from it entirely and eternally any likelihood of its even dreaming of an active role again.

This policy had succeeded largely, but it had never succeeded entirely. The Holy Court had its sources of information. And information now, as fast as it poured in, was turned over to Rond and Cane.

The *Persephone* had first stood to the Scrublands, but removed almost at once, remaining now at her second landing in the southern parts of the Dales of Lan. The Dales, almost entirely destitute of its forces by reason of the Dame's mobilization, was able to offer no resistance. City Larnissa had been captured and pillaged. Fiefs Tula and Sarn had been burned like heaps of rubble. Old Sword - Menna, excused from answering the levy, had risen from her sick-bed to lead what little resistance was possible. She had almost at once been killed, and no living thing was now to be seen on the scorched earth of Fief-Menna. The population of the Border Marches had fled into the Hills of Night.

Dame Hanna accused Rond and Jory of being scouts sent to spy out the land for the invasion, and demanded that King Mukanahan "cease to encourage their stay." His chamberlains replied that "the Holf Presence received with sorrow the words of Its faithful High Keeper and would meditate upon them."

Lady-Moha, evidently putting aside her vexation at having been deceived by O-Narra, urged the Dame to make common cause with Rond, Jory and their men. The Dame replied by ordering Moha to return to her fief and remain there.

Men from the *Persephone* entered City Saramanth under promise not to burn it; kept the promise, but sacked and raped. Sept Saramanth begged permission to return and avenge the outrage, were refused, broke camp in the night and were now en route back home. The Dame retaliated by outlawing the the leader of the Sept.

Verdanth, Toranth, Movissa and Harn met in joint council, advised the Dame to "avail herself of the wisdom of the Great Men at the Holy Court, who were familiar with the ways of the invaders." She made no reply.

And the King sent for Jory and Rond.

In the days when the legendary King Takanahan had been coerced into surrendering power to a High Keeper, the Temple in the Clouds had been a small mountain shrine. Through the centuries it had increased to the size of a small town. Mukanahan received them in an inner chamber of one of the many buildings which grew up around the original fane. There was only one chair in it—his own; and only one other item on the sea-blue rug—a large hamper.

"Many anguished prayers have reached me," he said. "And also—" he gestured to the hamper— "one present. I will share it with you." He lifted his left hand, and two equer-

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ries came forward, cut the cords which bound the hamper, and tumbled it on its side.

A man rolled out of it.

"It has been observed, and I think wisely," the little King said, "that those who have cast off one form of restraint can be induced only with difficulty to submit at once to another." The man on the rug muttered and twitched. His Guildsman's uniform was torn and soiled, and there was blood on it.

"At first these wicked men sallied forth from their great ship in groups, united to defile and ruin this peaceful Land. But, more and more of late, the groups have been smaller, have not acted in concert. Some of the men have been bold enough to range alone. This is one of them. A patrol of Sept Saramanth captured him en route and was noble enough to refrain from the vengeance rightfully theirs. I am sure that the Dame does not know he was sent to me, but that is her fault. Waken him!" The equerries stooped, wrenched open the man's mouth and removed a pad of some grassy stuff which emitted a rank and sickly odor.

For another moment the man mumbled incoherently. Then his eyes flew open. Slack-jawed, he gazed about him stupidly.

"On your feet, Guildsman!" Jory snapped.

The man's muscles tensed to obey, and he was half-erect before realization struck him. "'Guildsman'," he said, annoyed. "I'm no Guildsman! I'm a free man of the free ship *Persephone* . . . and who in the hell are you?"

"First Officer Cane. Captain Rond. That's all the introduction for the present. You will state your name and rate."

The man looked around. "No women," he muttered. "Just midgets and brass." Then a look of low cunning spread over his face, retreated, was replaced by one of patently false respect. "Astrocaster's Mate Toms Marton, sir. Um . . . when the mutiny broke out, see, I resisted it. But I was overpowered. Gee, sir, I'm glad —"

An equerry entered the room, handed over a note which was given to the King, who read it rapidly but said nothing.

"— to *see* you here," Marton concluded, lamely, his pose a bit jarred by the interruption. "I mean, glad the pettyboat made it safe. Danley figured you would. And as soon as I heard you was here I made up my mind I'd, um, escape . . . And join you . . ." His little, bloodshot eyes regarded them — curious, cunning, hopeful, rather like the eyes of an intelligent pig calculating its chances of eating the baby.

In the slow silence the distant sound of a gong announced the passing hour. Rond's hands crept to his chest, circled and fell to his sides. Jory knew what this meant: The captain had groped, perhaps unawares, for the golden circles of rank which would have been on his uniform, had he been wearing it. Somewhat uncertainly, and to Jory's displeasure, Rond said, "I am glad to hear your explanation, Guildsman. Probably . . . probably there were many men in your position . . .

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Promotion. . .special service pay . . . bonus . . ." His voice died away. The tiny swine-eyes observed. The loose lips rubbed each other. And Jory asked a question.

"*Darnley* figured we'd make it here?"

Marton nodded. "That's right, sir. Blaise. The bosun. Big, *ugly* fellow. He's in charge, up there. Terrible situation, sir. Ter —"

"What happened to Leading Officer Stone?"

Marton squinted thoughtfully. "Who, Aysil? He's around somewheres. But Blaise is the big noise. Yeah . . . un, yes-*sir*. Blaise is the big noise."

The junta still met, or had been meeting till recently. But it was a long time since it had actively decided anything more significant than what shows to run on the 3-D.

It had been Blaise Darnley's decision, rubberstamped by the junta, to postpone setting a course for the P'Dang System. Blaise Darnley had decided that instead *Persephone* would search for its pettyboat first. Darnley had taken the ship to the Second Guild's spotting station in C-2, and, finding none there but the small staff, destroyed it anyway, just as a precaution . . . Or perhaps just because Blaise liked destroying things. Too, he had said something about "practice" — but no one had then figured out what the practice was for.

In short, the bosun had come to the conclusion that releasing the two surviving officers and six loyal crewmen had been a mistake, and he intended to rectify the error.

Tests of Valentine's atmosphere showed traces of the pettyboat's fuel. Reticulation would eventually have shown whether or not the boat was still there — as he thought it probably was — but he was in no hurry to make any reticulations. By this time he was no longer taking precautions to keep what were probably his original intentions to himself. He let them leak out a little . . . Then a little more . . . He sat back and sniffed the wind. He sent out liberty parties; a liberty unchecked by restraint. He observed how the men liked it. Then he talked some more. In the end, he had probably talked more than he should have.

The free ship was to become a freebooting ship. Time enough to head for the merry, carefree life on the proceeds of what they'd get by selling the ship to the syndicate called the Forty Thieves. Come to think of it, those crooks probably weren't called The Forty Thieves for nothing, were they? Supposed *Persephone* arrived with only its hue, its engine and its cargo? They'd have to take whatever the syndicate offered, wouldn't they? Which might be a lot, or might be a little. And who in the hell ever heard of any crook syndicate offering any more than they could get away with?

Jory, as First Officer, had never had much to do with Bosun Darnley officially, and never had anything to do with him unofficially. Blaise was a bulk of a man, with a yellowed complexion which hinted at some chronic ailment, clipped

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and wiry black hair, and pale blue eyes. His voice was a rumble. He had reminded Jory of a muffled engine, humming with power, quivering with it, even. And then, that dreadful day in *Persephone*, the muffler had been ripped out, and the engine's full-throated, full-chested, full-bellied roar rose up and filled the air.

He could imagine Darnley going about his task of subverting the crew a second time, as he subverted them a first time. Could imagine the crew, dismayed, angered, uneasy. Had they thrown away everything for *pennies*? And could imagine them coming, whining, whimpering, to Darnley — "What should we do, Boats? Huh? What do you think? What should we *do*?" His imagination was corroborated by Marton's account. The captive was in some element of glory now, with his former captain and first officer — to whom he had probably never before spoken — hanging on his every word, allowing him full measure for narration, mimicry and self-aggrandizement . . . all this last probably a lie. *I told him, I said, Boats... that's where you made your big mistake, Boats. You'll never get away with it, I said.*

Nevertheless, despite Marton's warnings and advice, Darnley had come up with an answer. This planet, what the hell was it called? G-27.33S *gamma* 5, yeah, Valentine's — this planet was soft enough, wasn't it? Looked rich enough, didn't it? Okay, then. What did they want Blaise to do, draw them pictures? Fan out, get around, see what it's got. *And take it . . .*

"He had 'em believing," Marton said, oleaginous and confidential, "he had 'em believing they could load up *Persephone* with jewels and gold and rare earths and who knows what. And *then* off to the Cluster. See, his line was, that way they could hold out for a big price for her. See? Only . . ." Marton shrugged, winked, leered. He knew a thing or two about all that, his whole air implied.

Jory swallowed a strong impulse to wipe the greasy grin from the man's face. He even forced himself to smile a little.

"Blaise had *them* believing it, sure. But what about you? Don't tell me you fell for it. What? Come on. I can see that you figured him out. What tipped you off?"

Marton's grin slipped a bit for a second. But the bland assumption and the gross flattery did their work. The man looked around, came closer, winked. "Well, listen, First. I can put two and two t'gether as well as the next guy. Better than those other meat-heads. *you* know what kind of crazy set-up they got here — bunch o' midgets, women and old ladies with swords? It figures, First, it really figures. When I heard what Blaise let out that one time, the whole picture came into focus. That's when I *knew*, see? That's when I *knew*! *He* wasn't going to go back and sell the ship. *He* wasn't just figuring on holding a treasure-hunt. Uh-uh. Right?"

"Right," said Jory. And, "How did he put it, when he let it out that

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time? I mean, what were his exact words?"

Marton's eyes gleamed with pure pleasure. He swallowed, as if having tasted something rare and good. "'*Every man a king.*'" he said. "Don't it figure?"

Slowly Jory nodded. His reply was quite sincere. "It does figure."

Marton gave him a quick, calculating glance. "Why not? Who's to stop us? With what? *You* can be a king here, Captain *Rond* can be a king here, *I* can be a king here — huh? Why not? Easy as slicing butter. Right?"

"Right. Easier."

"Okay, then. How about it? You with us?"

All pretense was gone. The man's mouth was open, his tufty eyebrows raised, his nostrils quivered. And Jory said, "No."

It took a moment for the notion to get through, but Marton wasted no time in complaining. His heavy body lunged at Jory, his heavy fist swung up. Jory, on his back, saw Rond go to the floor. Marton had a knife in his hand. Jory started to rise, the man kicked at him, missed, rushed past him to the door. There was one equerry standing there, a solid little man with a quiet face. He moved to one side, then, as Marton came charging up, moved back, struck once, hard and low. Marton gave a shrill squeal, dropped the knife. The equerry leaned forward, took hold of one finger on each of the man's hands, and bent them back with one swift, sure motion. They heard the bones crack before Marton screamed again.

"What will you do with him?" Jory asked, after Marton was removed.

Mukanahan said, "Nothing at all. We will not even expel him. But I do not think he will wish to stay and we shall not prevent his leaving. As to what may happen after that, I neither know nor care."

Rond apologized. He felt himself disgraced that anyone who had been under his command should attempt to use a weapon in the Holy Court. His apology was sincere, but distracted, and suddenly developed into a brief exposition of the geologic history of oil formation. Did the annals of the Holy Court, he inquired, have any record of a dark oil seeping from the ground, or of natural gasses? The King assured him that he would have the annals searched. Much as I appreciate the Great Father's offer," Jory said, suddenly feeling the ceiling pressing down on him, "I believe that some quick action has to be taken."

Mukanahan said, "'Action' is not a word often heard in this court. Indeed, the very concept has been eroded through the centuries. I am aware that we may be capable of action. Sire Nahan just demonstrated it. Still, in general, we require assistance in formulating such a picture. What do you mean, in this case, by 'action,' and what do you mean, also by 'quick'?"

He placed his hands together. Jory, restless, said, "Is the Dame aware that these other man plan to carve up the Land for themselves?"

"Possibly."

"Then should we not make at

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least one more attempt to contact her and urge that we cooperate?"

Mukanahan nodded. "I see part of the picture. I cannot see it all. This message — " he held it up — "which I received a short while back, tends to obscure part of your picture. The Dame, it seems, had decided to attack. In fact, she did attack." He sighed. "And was captured."

XII

It had been close to three centuries since a High Keeper had been captured, and the result had been the passing of the office from the White Moiety of Sept Larn to Sept Sartissa. The Red Moiety had contested the succession for another generation before capitulating. It had not been contested since. All power rested, theoretically, in the Holy King; but it had been for over a thousand years part of the theory that this power was exercized by the Keeper of his Castles — whoever that Keeper might be. Now, with Dame Hanna's capture as she crossed into the Dales of Lan, a sort of paralysis set down upon the Land.

The Septs met in council, could come to agreement on only one thing: *Let all remain for now as it was.*

Each Sept wondered if it might not wrest from the situation something to its own advantage. No Sept trusted the others. A kind of quiver had passed through the social structure with the arrival of Rond, Jory and their men. The arrival of the main ship had caused something like a tremor. Facing they scarcely could guess what, the Great Ladies drew closer together. Mutual suspicion could not be overcome, but neither need it prove mutually destructive.

The sun still rose and set, the River Lan still coiled its slow way into the Sea of Silence, the aptors called in the thickets and every growing thing continued to burgeon on the ground. From Dame Hanna, hidden away somewhere inside the *Persephone,* no word came — and none came either from Bosun Blaise Darnell. Men continued to issue in and out of the ship, but there were no more attacks mounted from her. Nor did any other corps or sept venture to repeat the Dame's ill-fated attempt, and even Saramanth concentrated on binding up its people's wounds without making a gesture of revenge.

In this atmosphere of uneasy calm Rond and Jory called upon the King with a request.

He was in audience at the time, and they waited in the antechamber. Rond seemed to have aged a decade since his arrival on Valentine's Planet. The events on this new world themselves should not have worked the change.

"He has altered even since I have known him," O-Narra commented when Jory mentioned this to her. "Perhaps it took him that long to realize what had happened."

Jory wondered if she might not be right. First, the swift-moving events of the mutiny . . . then the the long, long voyage under double-slow narcohypnosis, with its infinitely taxing effects on the metabolism . . . and then, and only then, the un-

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familiar situations of Valentine's World. The blight had not hit him before, he never felt it till then. "Delayed reaction," in the old phrase, "to cumulative shock."

Whatever it was, he looked old and he looked ill. But still in his mind the ever-present question of fuel remained supreme.

"I am sorry to see, Mr. Cane," he said — as they walked to and fro in the anteroom, its walls hung with dim, blue tapestries of dim, blue kings doing dim, blue things — "that the question of fuel does not animate all the men as I am sure it does you." He glanced at his First Officer, got no reply, resumed his trend of talk. "I was astonished to overhear some of them even saying that, if conditions were only better, they might not mind staying. It passes my understanding. But only some of them, of course. Lockharn, I know, is as anxious as I am."

The door opened. In filed the chamberlains and equerries. Jory got a quick, flashing glimpse of scarlet and black, then the King entered, followed by more courtiers. Then the door shut.

"I have held over my audience," Mukanahan said, seating himself on the small throne, "until I have had time to attend to your wishes." He looked at them inquiringly, and Rond explained that he wished the King's gift of the contents of the borax warehouse. "And also the King's consent to depart back to our boat, on the island near the coast."

Mukanahan lifted his little hands, let them drop. "The desert salt you may certainly have. My leave to go is automatic— I never prevent anyone from leaving. But . . . the decision of the Septs was, as you know, *Let all things remain as before.* That includes your own status. Inside, you are pilgrims and guests of the Holy Court. Outside . . . you are once again under the Dame's proscription. Most of the Great Ladies had taken the oaths for your heads." He sighed. "I do not know, I really do not know. Well. Let us inquire."

He gestured to the courtiers. The door was opened. A moment passed, and then the members of the other audience came in.

The scarlet and black of their armor was as glossy as ever, but no swords lay in their scabbards, only sprigs of leaves. Jory had already learned to identify the emblems on their shoulders — the tan's head of Larnissa, the three grass blades of Verdanth, the red and the white arptors of the two Moieties of Larn, the war-rattle of Tula —emblems encircled in gold to indicate Sept leadership.

"Prayers have reached the Holy Presence," said Mukanahan, "that the Great Men here be returned to their vessel together with the bitter salt of the desert which they require for its fires. The Holy Presence will listen to other prayers on that subject."

Larnissa, a tall and gaunt woman, with sunken, sea-colored eyes, swung around to face the captain. "You came to prepare the way for the murderers in the great vessel," she charged. "You bear blame."

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Courteously, Rond said. "No, madam."

Verdanth, a mountain of a woman, face as red as her hair, said, "The murderers came here in pursuit of you."

"This . . . this may be so."

"Then — " doggedly — "you bare blame."

White Larn, a slender slip of a girl, said, "There are prophecies concerning you, and they have not been fulfilled. You cannot go."

Red Larn, grief written on her lovely face, asked, "How can you go when these great wrongs remain unpunished?"

And Tula, like a burning brand, cried, "You must fight at our side, or all the Land will die!"

The echoes of her voice sounded and died away. The King spoke very softly. "Our High Keeper required an oath of you concerning these Great Men. We will hold that oath to be in abeyance during her absence. To the Great Man still at their boat, the Holy Court sends bitter desert salt, and with it, the two oldest of them. May it not be that the others will consult with you on further necessary measures?"

To this oblique decision, which did not and could not satisfy everybody, nobody could object. The Holy King did not often voice a decision, but once voiced it must be obeyed.

Rond and Lockharn, provided with the black scarves which made them pro forma members of the priesthood, and thus safe from molestation, departed with an escort and a train of sixty tans— three of them carrying supplies and the other fifty-seven bearing loads of borax. The captain was almost feverish to get away. "I place you in charge, Mr. First," he said — said it, in fact, repeatedly. "It will be no easy effort for Crammer, Lockharn and me to prepare the boron by ourselves. But we will manage it. Once that is done, the rest is easy: Back, by stages if necessary, to the nearest Guild installation. Assure these Valentine people that the Guild will see to it that Darnley and his rogues are punished."

Lockharn's comment was briefer. "All's I want, I want to pension out and buy that farm. See you soon, shipmates."

And they were off. Jory, following the procession with his eyes, felt oddly relieved to see them go.

White Larn lifted her chin. "It is impossible," she said. The other Sept leaders echoed her statement. "Lead us in battle, share your warlock skills with us, and we will crush the murderers as one crushes eggs. But — retreat?"

Jory pleaded with her, not for the first time, "It's only a strategic retreat — a military tactic. It doesn't involve any less valor than an advance or attack. There is no other way!"

"White Larn cannot retreat!"

"Nor Red Larn, either!"

Gaunt Larnissa, massy Verdanth and fiery Tula confirmed their words. In despair, Jory strode from the council room.

Levvis, Storm, Duston, Mars, O-Narra and Rahan-Joe were waiting

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for him. "What did they say, Mr. Cane?" asked Levvis. Jory told him. The tall Guildsman shook his head. "I don't know. I don't know exactly what's holding Darnley up, either. Maybe he's on a super-drunk. But he won't stay on greensleave forever. And when he sobers up . . ."

O-Narra shook back impatiently the hood of the blue-green robe she now wore. "Fools," she said. "They still think they are involved in some silly feud . . . a point of etiquette or honor between Fief-Lanna and their Heiress of Menna, who sits first to dine, or nonsense like that." Jory, looking at her, found it hard to believe that this woman, speaking now so rationally, was the same who — clad in scarlet and black armor, waving her glittering sword — had charged at them, leaping and howling, intent on their death or hers, that first day which seemed so long ago.

She looked at him, she took him by the hand, she smiled.

"Go to Nelsa," she said.

He looked at her, astonished. "I . . . I don't even know where she is."

Storm cleared his throat. He seemed a trifle shy, but it took him only a moment to say what he had to. "Uh . . . Mr. First . . . *we* know where she is. Like us to take you over there?" Jory nodded. He had almost forgotten about the men since arriving in the shady, peaceful, park-like enclosure of the Holy Court. But they didn't give him time to reproach himself, nor did they seem to feel neglected. They seemed, in fact, as they walked across the smooth grass, to be quite cheerful. That this might be due to the quickened prospect of escape from Planet Valentine . . . but then he remembered Rond's words.

He had no time to reflect on them. They passed through one of the innumerable gates into one of the innumerable courtyards. Here was a sort of caravanserai, a pilgrims' quarters. And that was something else he had forgotten — and embarrassment burned his cheeks — the mixed multitude who had risked life to follow him and his captain, whom he had manipulated (there was no other word for it) in such way as to provide for his own safe entrance into the sanctuary of the Holy Court. There, at peace, with O-Narra, still concerned with his own affairs, it was easy to forget.

But it seemed he was not so easily forgotten.

"Ah, Giant!"

Nelsa . . .

A pleased buzz went up from all the runaways, the little men, the peasant-women and servitors. Nelsa was there, and all her band, including the ancient old priestess who stroked his hand with her withered paw. He saw Storm take hold of one of the outlaws and give her a hearty kiss. Two of them took Mars by the hand, and even Duston seemed awaited . . . welcome . . . and domesticated.

"When are the questions to be answered, Giant?" Nelsa asked. "We have been waiting. Your men, true, have answered certain questions for some of my women, But meanwhile other questions have come up. I

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have been strongly tempted, Giant, in these times of upset and commotion, to go outside the walls again, and see if I could not provide answers of my own."

She was a vigorous woman, with a considerable robust charm quite different from O-Narra's. With some small effort he saw her now as a woman only, and not as a possible ally. And he saw that she had a fine, full figure, and a pleasant face. "Well, Giant?" Her words got him out of his revery. She listened to him. She nodded, thoughtfully. Then she said, "So you came to us, the outlaws, the people of the forest, to play the tricks the Great Ladies are too proud to play?"

Nettled, he said, "No! I came to you in hopes you had more sense than those gaudy fools, who are frozen into a mold which they haven't yet realized is going to be broken into little pieces any day! I hoped you'd place the survival of your race over your damn-fool pride. I—" He broke off, and turned to go.

She seized his arm and, woman or not, her grip held firm. He swung back. "Giant," she said; "Great Man; don't shout. My ear is not lower than your mouth, and I can hear every word you say. Say more."

XIII

Rama was a good-sized town lying in that part of the Border Marches nearest to *Persephone* which had not yet been ravaged. Its population had fled into the Hills of Night. Rond led his newly-recruited forces into it quite early one morning after a long march through the blackness.

Nelsa and her women were with him, as were many of the run-aways. Levvis, Storm, Mars and Duston were not, though they had protested loudly and vigorously. He had been obliged to pull rank, had observed that rank didn't pull as far or as easily as it used to, had been glad (though a little chagrined) when the men at last allowed Nelsa and her band to persuade them to stay behind.

All day long, while part slept, part carried out the daily tasks as if no threat existed; then they changed watches and some slept while others cooked food, walked about the streets or pretended to buy or sell merchandise in the abandoned shops. As night fell, preparations were made as though it were a festal occasion. Great lamps were lit and hung up in the streets, tables were set out for the food preparing in big caldrons in the yards. Music, song, rejoicing and the dance . . .

The trap was baited.

"Do you think they will notice there are no children?" Nelsa asked.

"No . . . the dolls will fool them. It was a good idea. And yours."

She smiled, peered through the window. Too bad that you must hide inside. Really, they are putting their hearts into it out there. You'd think it was Lakanahan's Day, or Solstice . . . Ah, the music! Let me show you, Giant, how we dance to this tune in the forests. Put your arms . . . so. And I put mine . . . so.

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Now, this way, and back. And to the right. Very good indeed. It is most curious, dancing with a man. We can't dance with our own, you know. They are very dear, some of them, but it had never occurred to me how *small*, how very, very small they were. Now forward . . . Are you finding it as pleasing as I am? No, no, you can't. You have danced with women your size before, but never until now had I had the arms of the Great Men around me."

He found his feet adapting quickly to the simple step, alien though the music was. "What?" he asked. "Have none of our crewmen answered questions for you?"

"No," she said. "I am not so eager. I am patient."

He stopped abruptly. "Shall I reward your patience?" he murmured, and pressed his lips upon hers.

She sighed deeply, and then the music stopped in mid-note. And then the shouting and the screams began. Nelsa tore herself from his arms. "*Remember*!" he called to her as she ran. "*Remember*!"

At least twenty men in baggy and soiled Guild uniforms had burst into the circle of light. The small men who had been dancing there fled, shouting. The invaders stopped a moment, looked down the street. "There's the women!" one of them cried, and the pursuit began.

The women screamed, fell back, but not far. The small men milled around, noisily. Deeper and deeper into the throng the crewmen pushed, laying about them with the metal bars they used for clubs. Jory, peering through the partly closed window, decided that Blaise Darnley must be keeping the lock on the laser-guns. Issuing them only to "*authorized expeditions*" — of which this was patently not one.

The mutineers passed closely by, faces intent and furious. And the women still retreated, still screamed shrilly, still moved none too fast. And then the high, piercing whistle of the arptor-bone . . .

And Nelsa and her friends appeared from their hidey-holes, in their black armor, brandishing the weapons retrieved from where they had deposited them after taking refuge at Court. The decoy women uttered their final scream, and turned to watch the fight.

The mutineers were outclassed as far as weapons were concerned, but they had the superiority of numbers. They beat back the attack, were in turn beaten back, were harried by the unexpected assault of swarms of little men who poured from the side-streets and houses. To and fro the struggle went, shouts and screams and blood in the dim glow of the lamps and the guttering light of the torches.

Jory wondered if he was going to have to stay, lurking, inside the house forever. And then, finally, his ears heard what he was waiting for. He rushed out into the night. One of the mutineers lay in the gutter, bleeding, motionless. Jory stooped, snatched up the metal bar lying by the flaccid hand, and ran forward, shouting.

Again, the shrill whistle of the arptor bone, imitating the cry of the

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beast itself ... arp-*tor*! ... arp-*tor*! The small men vanished away into the darkness again. The fighting women melted away into the shadows, one by one. The mutineers hesitated, turned to check the source of the cries now echoing in the all-but deserted street. They did not at first identify Jory, still wearing the robe of Royal blue which the tailors of the Holy Court had fashioned for him. They huddled, confused, at the end of the street.

And then came the sound of running feet.

From out of the darkness at the upper end of the street poured — as Jory had calculated they eventually must — the reinforcements which had until now been lying in wait outside the walls of Tula. The second group of mutineers came hurtling down the way. And Jory stood, as if confused, between the two groups. Too late, he made for the safety of the doorways. In a moment they were upon him, bearing him to the ground.

A voice said, "Who in the hell is *this*?"

And another said, "I've seen that face. He's no native!" Astonished, triumphant, then: "It's the First! The First! It's Jory Cane!"

They were far from gentle with him. No traces of past loyalties kept them from killing him then and there, as the last of the torches sank down into smoking embers. He owed his life to one thing alone. "Blaise'll want him," someone said. The others drew back, reluctantly. "Blaise wants too damn much," said another.

"*You* want to tell him that?"

"*Sure,* I'll tell him that."

"Aaa... So you didn't get no women?"

Sullenly, accusing and excusing, they tore the sleeves from his robe, bound his arms and hands and hobbled his feet, and led him away with them. One small note of cheer they seemed to get from it all. "You must of thought we wouldn't see through your scheme, hey, Cane? Figured you'd really dry-gulch us. Maybe you aren't as bright as you thought, First Officer."

As they dragged him, stumbling painfully, through the darkness spottilly lit by their belt-lamps, *Maybe not,* Jory thought. Rond didn't think much of his First Officer's grounding in the classics of the pre-Technic Era, for instance. But Jory knew a little of a few of them, and one line kept repeatedly running through his mind.

Don't throw me in the briar patch, Brer Wolf!

XIV

The warning nodes on their uniforms buzzed, telling them they were near the guard-wires... guard-wires, Jory noted, set too close to the ship. Was Darnley nervous? Or just careless? "What's the password?" some one wanted to know, as they halted.

"*I* dunno."

"*Free ship,* isn't it?"

"*Free ship* was yesterday."

"Well, what the hell, try it anyway."

They did, and it worked. They

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passed through safely, and in a few minutes came to the lighted circle in which *Persephone* sat. Jory's heart beat faster at the sight of her. If only she could be recaptured! But, fast as the thought was, objections came crowding just as fast. The task was impossible, probably. Even if it succeeded, how could the six men and two officers take her up safely and bring her through successfully? Or how could they trust any of the mutineers? The answer to both questions was, they could not.

There was excitement at the ramp.

"Hey, the liberty party's back... Aaah, that ain't no woman!"

"That's for sure. But look who it *is*!"

"Jory Cane!"

"Some people never learn, huh?"

The signs of slackness and ill-discipline lay everywhere around, from the unkempt clothing to the littered passageways. "Where's Blaise right now?" one of his captors asked.

"Where is he usually? Up in officers' country, laying plans of glory."

The men sniggered, jerked him along. "Excuse us, First Officer, the side-boys are busy right now, but maybe the Bosun himself will pipe you aboard." Some of the light-units had gone dead, others blinked warningly. No one seemed to be doing any repairs. Men strolled around listlessly, not even bothering to look up when informed of Jory's capture. Others laughed or jeered, offered him drinks. Here and there groups or single crewmen were busy boozing it up, and once or twice he heard female voices. Evidently not all the captive women were finding captivity unpleasant. Which was to be expected.

Up in what had been officers' country some measure of discipline still prevailed. Guards patrolled the corridors, and there was less dirt visible. What was left of the liberty party — most of it had dropped out on the way — turned Jory over to the guards.

"We figured Blaise would want him."

"Probably. Okay."

"We want to see what Blaise is going to do with him."

"He'll send you a letter. On your way."

Muttering and scowling, but with eyes on the guards' guns, the others took themselves off. Jory was marched along the once-familiar passage by the silent guards. He did not know the men personally, but recognized the type: men who smiled seldom, had no friends, enjoyed cleaning their weapons more than almost anything else, enjoyed using them even more than cleaning them. Blaise had chosen his Praetorians well.

The tramp of feet echoed. And someone came suddenly out of an open door and all but ran into Jory, someone in the filthiest uniform he had yet seen. His exclamation, "Mr. Stone!" was a mixture of astonishment, pity and revulsion. The guards halted.

Aysil Stone peered at him, tried to focus his red, dimmed, filmy eyes. A light of recognition shone,

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and something which might have been meant for a smile struggled a moment on his bloated face, then gave up. "Jory Cane . . ." His drunkard's breath stank worse than ever. Then the guards pushed him aside. There was not even contempt in the act. He might have been an object. They pulled at Jory's arms, and he followed. Behind him, he heard the Leading Officer say, in a low, low voice, "See — you got to have the breaks."

Not surprisingly, they halted in front of the captain's quarters. Surprisingly, this area was immaculately clean. A voice behind the door asked the ancient question, "Who goes there?"

"Duty guard, sir, with a prisoner." The door opened, and the oddest sight Jory had yet seen in *Persephone* stood before him. He recognized the man at once, but did not know, had never known, his name. The rudiments of a handsome face were there, but they had somehow been pulled too long, twisted too much askew. The result was slightly grotesque. He wore an officer's uniform which did not fit him. Two guns were at his hips, which were disproportionately low in relation to his height, and an elaborately ornamental dagger hung from his belt.

"I relieve you of your prisoner," said the masquerade.

He drew one of his guns, gestured Jory inside. They passed through the outer cabins and halted outside the office. "Sir, request permission to come in with prisoner."

"Granted."

Blaise Barnley sat at the captain's desk. His face was yellower than ever and under the blue-white lights it even looked a trifle green. His hands lay half-open, thumbs up, before him — yellow-green hands, tufted with sparse bristles of black hair. There was a slight gummy deposit in one corner of the too wide mouth. He looked at Jory with wary interest, without anger or amiability. The effect was somehow of a huge and unfamiliar animal.

It was not pleasant.

"Well," said Darnley. Then, "I was forgetting introductions. Former First Officer Jory Cane — Brevet Lieutenant - Commander Brend Wace." There had been neither brevet rank nor lieutenant - commanders in space service for centuries, but the 3-costume dramas (from which poor Wace certainly had drawn for his own get-up) were still full of both. The two mutineers looked at him carefully, defying him to laugh or even display amusement.

He inclined his head just the slightest, said, "Sir."

Darnley and Wace seemed to relax the least bit. "Mannerly fellow," said the former. "You always were. Junked your uniform, I see. Gone native. Good idea. Squaw-man? Well, never mind. Where are you at and what are you up to?"

Addressing his remarks to Darnley, but intending them for Wace, Jory said, "I cannot tell you, Bosun. Loyalty to my men and my commanding officer forbids me." Wace's eyes widened; he gave a little nod of approval.

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Darnley, who certainly understood what Jory was up to, simply ignored it. "Too bad I didn't have time to work on you and win you over, First," he said. His rumbling voice seemed a little tired. "Instead of letting the old man bamboozle me into giving him and the other jack asses the pettyboat. I could use that boat now. And I could use you now, too—hey, Commander?"

Wace nodded violently. Jory said, "Thank you, gentlemen. But the carefree life in The Cluster doesn't appeal to me."

Darnley looked at him carefully. "It doesn't appeal to *us*, either. You're no fool. You know what would happen. These slobs would blow their money in about a year's time. Less, in some cases. And then they'd be on the beach. Looking for *us*. Wanting *us* to support them. Mad at *us* for still having something. No, no. That's no good."

Again he paused. Jory said nothing. He had a growing impression, not based on anything Darnley had yet said, of the man's alienness. The human and familiar in him seemed submerged, replaced largely by something Jory was not able to identify and could but partly sense.

Darnley resumed his discourse. The crewman thought he wanted to find treasure here, precious cargo. In a way he did. Not for export. That was the old way of doing things. The way of the Guilds. Buying, shipping, selling. — *Out*. The whole of Valentine's Planet was one big treasure. Why look elsewhere? He hadn't found out much yet about the other continents and island groups. But this one right here had the best, the toughest class of people.

What if the ruling caste were women? They could be used the same as men. With the right man behind them they could take over the whole planet.

"And I," said Darnley flatly, as if communicating some minor but incontestable piece of information, "am the right man."

Jory did not bother to deny it. It occurred to him, with great force, that Darnley *was* the right man . . . if "right" could apply to the conquest of a planet.

Darnley went on in his flat, echoing voice. Those ancient pre-T people, Pizarro and Cortez, hadn't they conquered a continent apiece? They had, and with only a hundred men between them. "I could do the same," he said, "if I had a hundred men. If they were a hundred good men. I've got more bodies, but that's all they are—bodies. They had a chance, but I see it was no use." He pondered a moment. "No use," he repeated; and Jory for a moment felt his bowels turn, thinking of how easily Darnley would get rid of those useless "bodies" when he was ready.

"Never mind," Darnley continued. "There are other ways. I'll get the power. But, you know, First, there are more kinds of power than physical force. What people do depends on what they believe. There aren't many men like me. You know that. Wace knows it. The people here on Valentine's Planet will all know it

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soon. They won't worship this midget any more, Cane. They'll worship *me*, Cane. Some of them are doing it already. I can feel it. Can you feel it, Wace?"

Jory didn't hear Wace's reply. He felt cold. There was a more than physical fear, too, and that was what he was feeling now. The alien thing inside Blaise Darnley was visible to him now. He shuddered.

Blaise said, "You're feeling it now, too, Cane. Don't resist it. Ride with it. There's nothing for you with the Guild any more. Even if you could get back. You can't."

His voice went on and on, then it stopped. Then it said. "You won't be stubborn. Not for long. You can be a king — countries and castles, slaves, women, power, glory, anything you want. You'll come around. Don't take too long."

Wace took him and led him out. The door closed on the no longer human thing which spoke with Blaise Darnley's voice. "I'm cutting your bonds now," Wace said. "Don't try to escape. Remember what he said: 'It was a mistake to leave you alive, but that can be rectified . . . one way or another.' You better pick the right way."

The guards took him, discussed among themselves where to put him, finally took him off to what had once been a chart room. There was a couch and a cloak, stacks of rations and water.

"Blaise wouldn't like you to try and escape," one of them said. "Personally, I wouldn't mind." The look he gave left no doubt that such an escape was not intended to deceive.

Eventually, Jory came to wonder if Blaise had not just forgotten about him. Days passed. He spent his time scanning the charts. The long-familiar names, with their power to summon up the past. . . Humboldt's Two Worlds and Hudson's Sun, the P'dong Cluster and Island L'vong, Harrison Binary, Trismegistus, and the blue-white and multitudinous stars of The Lace Pattern . . . Verdanth, Toranth and Saramanth, Sartissa, Larnissa, Tarntissa and the Moieties of Larn . . . No. No, that was wrong. Those names had nothing to do with The Lace Pattern. They belonged right here on Valentine's Planet.

It was then that Jory decided two things. One: he had been in the ship too long. Two: if his being here was to accomplish anything at all, it had better not wait upon Blaise Darnley's megalomaniac pleasure any further.

What did the names on the star charts mean to him any more? Island L'Vong was as far off now as the never-seen Homeworld; distant, distant Trismegistus, whose black skies held, but two stars, which the autochthones believed to be the eyes of God — what was Trismegistus to him now? As much — and as little — as the Directorate of the Guild of the Third Academy. The once-august phrase now seemed to echo in a hollow and empty chamber. They did not matter.

What mattered to him now?

Answers crowded, thick and many. O-Narra mattered, Nelsa mattered, Little King Mukanahan and tall Levvis, the anguish in the

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eyes of Red Larn, the fate of the towns and cities of the Dales of Lan. *Valentine's Planet mattered now, and almost nothing else!*

And here he stood, locked up and useless . . .

The door, of course, was locked. That way out was no way out. He heard a voice, looked around to see its source, realized it was his own, paused to listen. "The way out is the way in and the way in is the way out . . ."

What had he meant by it? What other way in was there, except the door? What came into the room, besides himself? Nothing, no one. Unless . . .

Water came in. And air came in. And, hence, had to go out again.

He scanned, very carefully, almost cunningly (for who knew but what Blaise Darnley might not have overheard?), the walls, one by one. There was the water, the fixtures plain to see. But that way out was no way out for a man. The air? No visible vents. But vents there had to be. He took a chair, piled another chair on it, climbed, felt the bulkheads and overheads as far as his hands could reach. Nothing.

He climbed down, moved the chairs, climbed again, felt again. And still nothing.

His neck and back began to ache. Once he fell and lay in almost terror lest someone, alerted by the noise, came in. But no one came. He piled the chairs and began again. The overhead of the chartroom was, appropriately enough, one great chart itself, showing the sectors.

He looked at it dully. From this angle there seemed to be a slight distortion. In fact, from every angle there seemed to be slight distortion. Surely The Lace Pattern, despite its name, was by no means so symmetrical? Slowly, painfully, he dragged his chairs over and under; painfully, slowly, he climbed once more and groped his hands over . . . No, no. That was wrong. He took his hands away, spit on them, rubbed them together, then — holding them palms up — a few inches below the inset chart, moved them slowly along.

And so, at last, he felt the cool breath of the moving air as it entered and as it left, circulated by the great lungs of the great ship itself.

XV

The lungs were shallow-breathing now, but that was all right. There was little clearance in the ventilator conduits, but that was all right, too. Jory did not know exactly where he was going, but he knew approximately where he wanted to go. Haste was impossible, lethargy was gone. His rate was slow but it kept steady.

Officers' country. . . The guards . . . Was Blaise so afraid of his crew that he needed to hide? Not likely. In fact, most unlikely. Why, then, the guards? If not to keep anyone out, then . . . to keep someone in?

He slithered around corners like a snake, he hung by his heels like a bat, he climbed like a monkey. He squinted into each opening he came to. Twice he came to dead ends and had to go back. Most of the rooms

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were empty and dead. Aysil Stone he saw, mooning and muttering over his carafe of greenruin. Second Officer Toms Tarkington's room was still as it had been when he rushed out to his death — book fallen open on the floor, bed rumpled where he had been lying on it. Another room looked familiar and he passed it by before he realized it was his own. And he looked down on Darnley's and Brend Wace's heads.

"When?" the younger man was demanding. "*When*?"

And Blaise said, his tone flat, calm, inhuman, mad, "Soon. Soon."

And so, at length and at last, he saw what he had been looking for.

He had never seen it from this angle before, probably no one ever had. But he recognized it at once. The dyed hair, the stiff posture unbent by imprisonment. The figure sitting as still and as straight as when he had first seen it being borne along in its white palanquin.

"Greetings, Dame Hanna, and peace and blessings from the Holy Court," he said through the vent.

She did not move nor stir. But he heard her say, "Since when has the Holy Court sent greetings and blessings by the mouths of warlocks? And what peace can there be, so long as you and your fellows are here?"

Aware that there was really no answer. Jory refrained from attempting any. His fingers felt about in the darkness, not much dispelled by the spots of light coming from the vent, until he found the studs which fastened it to the main overhead. In theory every stud in the ship should have been tightened regularly to take care of the loosening caused by the pounding and vibration of the engines. This had obviously not been done lately.

"Listen to me, Dame Hanna —"

"Deceiver of Moha, subverter of Mukanahan, warlock invisible, have I a choice?"

"There is a saying, 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend.'"

He paused. She said nothing. She did not really move, but something subtly altered in her manner. A moment in which he might have spoken passed while he considered this, and then the door was open. Brend Wace stood there, thumb of one hand in a gun-loop, other hand on his gaudy dagger. Jory wondered at what point in the young man's life fantasy had overmastered fact, dragging him from present truth to ancient romance.

Wace bowed. The gesture was grotesque, but not insincere. "Your Highness," he said. From the Dame, stiff and upright in her golden armor, no reply. "His Imperial Divinity has sent me to inquire if you have agreed to his offer." No reply. "Your refusal does credit to your pride," Wace declaimed, "but not to your sensibility. Don't you consider the welfare of your people? Don't you want to stop this needless sacrifice? You have to realize that the Imperial and Divine Blaise must and will triumph eventually, not just over this one country and continent, but over your entire world. Why should you be his prisoner when you can be his Divine Empress?"

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Still she made neither motion nor reply. Jory, concealed in the cramped darkness, felt that he now understood so much which had been obscure. This was why Blaise Darnley was waiting and biding his time. This was the other way he had determined on, when it became clear that his crewmen were not the stuff of which conquistadores were made.

Tactically, it was a brilliant notion. The person of the High Keeper was the source of all actual power in the Great North Land. Blaise now had her person, but the person was in effect inert. Could he but make her part of his own person, the whole Land would be his, to build what he wanted and as he wanted upon the ancient and traditional power structure. Conquest by marriage! Yes, it was a brilliant conception.

The only flaw was that it did not seem to be working.

Brend declaimed on. "Resistance is futile. Prolonged suffering to no purpose is worse than futile. Accept my master's noble offer, set an example for your other amazons which I and the elite guard will proudly follow, and together we will breed a new race and, using this planet as our base, sooner or later take over the stars and all the planets which —"

And Jory, having removed all the studs, and having silently lifted out the vent, jumped.

His feet struck Wace's both shoulders with all force. The man's mouth opened in a grotesque grimace and on a scream so high and so strained as to be almost inaudible. He fell in upon himself and collapsed in a twisted heap. He gave a spasmodic movement. Hanna struck once, struck twice. Wace lay quite still.

Then she faced Jory. "The enemy of my enemy is *not* my friend," she said, "if he was my enemy to begin with. There is still no peace."

"Truce?"

No emotion moved on the surface of that stony face, but after a moment she nodded. "Until we leave here, warlock."

Jory shook his head. "In your absence, the Septs have met in council and issued a directive. *Let all things remain as before.* I want you to confirm this . . . for at least a week's time." Perhaps in that period he would be able to talk her into some acceptance of the fact that her purpose and his own were now the same.

Still expressionless, she nodded. "For one week, then. And now — how do we leave? By *that*?" She pointed to the open vent above them.

"No," he said. "There is another way."

Wace, were he alive, would have admired the classical simplicity of the trick; it figured, certainly, in enough 3-D costume dramas, many of them set in the ancient pre-Technic period. He took Wace's ridiculous dagger from its ornate sheath. It was razor sharp. How many hours must the posturing fool have spent in honing it?

— And he cut Hanna's hair.

He helped her remove her ar-

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mor, and together they stripped Wace of his uniform. The golden mail was not a good fit, but at least and at last they got it on. Jory could imagine the loathing and disgust which she must feel to see her outfit thus profaned. But she said nothing, and once again he owned his respect for her. They laid Wace in the bed, face to the bulkhead, and covered his own mousy hair with the long, dyed-red tresses cut from Hanna's own. It would not deceive anyone for long. But the whole operation was working on leases of short-numbered hours.

Or minutes.

"His clothes will fit me," she observed calmly — and proceded to dress herself in them. "But red hair is too uncommon among your people. How shall we conceal that?" They concealed it with the grease and the dust of the ventilator, Jory thankful that Darnley had not kept a clean ship. Then, waving her truce-mate back and out of sight, she simply opened the door and looked out. Her look was brief. She retreated, but didn't close it.

A voice asked, "That you, Lieutenant-Commander? You want me?" By the sound of the voice, Jory calculated its distance, and when the man walked through the door Jory shot him through the head from the side. The laser-beam was as thin as a needle. He could see the tiny, black-rimmed hole it had left in the upper part of the ear.

And the cabin's communicator said, "Well, Commander?" — Darnley.

Jory thought swiftly; then, imitating Wace's rather nasal tones, he said, quick and please-don't-bother-me-now, in InterGal, "Progress, I think." There was a short silence. Then —

"Progress, I *hope*. Succeed, and We will overlook the disrespect of your manner to Us."

Hanna made no comment on his use of InterGal, though she might have been justified in being suspicious. She said only, "There is no one in the next room. And this one's clothes will fit you."

He changed rapidly from his blue robe into the dead guard's uniform. A slight bulge in the pocket . . . he drew out a flask of greensleeve. He rinsed his mouth with the bitter-sweet distillat which generations of discipline had not been able to prevent spacemen from making, spat it out. "Do the same," he urged her. "I'll explain later."

While she complied, grimacing at the strong and unfamiliar taste, he took stock of their situation. This had been the commodore's cabin, empty on this as on most voyages. There were two doors in the next room, besides the one leading to the corridor. And one of these two was locked. Jory handed her one of the laser-guns. "You point it, so. Think of it as a crossbow shooting invisible bullets. To fire, press *here*." She nodded. "Cover me," he said. And opened the other door.

And found himself face to face with Aysil Stone.

The Leading Officer showed no surprise. After a moment he said, "You're trying to make the

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breaks. I tried it. Didn't work. I'd been better off, beach-comber. Too late —"

His cabin stank of drink and his own unwashed self. Jory said, "Help us to get out. You've got nothing to lose."

Stone considered this. "It's right. Nothing to lose. Nothing to gain . . . Might's well. What the hell." He gave a half-shrug, pointed to a narrow door. "Makes all the stops up and all the stops down. Sugges' the latter. My bes' to Marrus. Tell him . . . tell him, 'Sorry'." His face twisted. He turned it away.

"The dumbwaiter," it was called, in ships' slang — only the Commanding and Leading Officers had the private elevators in their cabins. Jory stopped the small cage between decks, reflected. There was certainly no point in going up. But . . . how far down? He looked at the studs. After *Main* they bore only letters, and the lower studs were in three banks, and of different sizes. He could only guess where they would lead. Go back and ask Aysil Stone?

No.

He pressed the lowermost one on the right-hand side. *BD*. Brig Deck? Baggage Deck? Back Deck? In a moment they would see.

XVI

Jory had expected to find guards, no matter where they wound up. He had been counting on the slacker discipline below decks to allow them, somehow, to slip through. What he had not counted on was no guards at all.

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For a moment they stood there, having gotten out of the elevator, his arms cautiously holding back Hanna. Then realization of their location hit him, and, with that, the awareness that he had unwittingly picked the one place on the ship where there would be no guards at all.

The boat dock.

There was nothing left to guard.

He had last seen it packed with hooting, jeering mutineers as he, Rond, the loyal crewmen, were sent aboard the pettyboat. Now there was no one but himself and Hanna. They could move as they wished . . . but he had now to figure out where they wished to move. Hugging the bulkhead and beckoning her to follow, he moved along.

The great trolleys along which the pettyboat had rolled into its space lock hung empty, and the lock itself was now open. They came finally to the edge and looked out and down.

The day was almost over. Shadows swung long upon the ground far below. The great circle of light which had lit up the ship and its area when he had been taken aboard last time must soon go on again. If the elevator went no further, and the ramp was under guard —as it must be, slack discipline or no — how were they to get down?

A sound of trampling feet made him spin around. There was one of the crewmen, holding a woman by the hand. By her costume she was a peasant, by her slack-faced witless grin and uncertain step she was drunk. Her companion caught sight of them, pulled her back, faced them truculently.

"Shove off!" he said. "This one's mine — I won her in a crap game and I ain't sharing!"

Jory, keeping into the shadows said, cajolingly, "Ah, come on, fellow, don't make a fuss, or you'll have *every*body down here on us."

The man grunted. "Well, shove *off*, then —" Jory grinned, made a deliberate show of leaning forward, noisily blowing out his breath. The crewman sniffed. "Hey. Greenruin. Give's a snort, huh?"

"Sure. All's we want to do is get out and find us some women of our own. I don't want to use the ramp, I owe what's-his-name, on duty there —"

The crewman, impatient, said, "Look, there's the aft ladder behind you. Now — give's a snort and get going."

Jory tossed him the flask, watched it caught in mid-air, opened in a second. He turned for the pool of shadow which was the aft ladder, suddenly remembered something. "Hey — what's the password today?"

The bottle, gurgling, was lowered for a moment. "Password? Um . . . *Great is Blaise Danley*. Ain't that a —?" Words failed him, he tilted the bottle again, groped for the woman. Jory and Hanna silently vanished down the naked and spiraling stair.

Presently the spiral straightened into a long oblique which seemed to go on forever down inside the vane. And then, without warning, there was the ground beneath their feet.

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Faintly a rim of sun showed on the horizon. Faintly a hum of voices sounded from the escalator on the ramp. He took Hanna by the hand and moved out and away.

The lights should have been on by now. Probably the Illuminator's Mate who had the duty, or whatever passed for duty on *Persephone* these days, was boozing or wenching or lounging or just listlessly roaming around; thinking dim and wistful thoughts of treasure or the gold-plated beaches of The Cluster; and wondering why, when and how the mutiny which was to fulfill his dreams had gone sour.

They were some distance from the ship when the great circle burst into light. And, simultaneously, the alarm burst into horrible clamor. Jory's mouth cried, "Down! Down! Flat!" And his mind cried, *He's just found out about Wace!*

Faces pressed into the grass which grew here, outside the scorched area of the set-down, they crawled on. Suddenly the warning buzzing of the nodes sounded. "*Great is Blaise Darnley!*" Jory said. "*Great is Blaise Darnley . . .*"

But not till they were into the shelter of the trees did he feel it was safe to rise. Behind and below and above them, *Persephone* was a tower of light. And all the while she rang out the fear, the alarm and perhaps even the grief of the madman who now held her in captivity.

Jory's plan was to lure Blaise from the ship with a massive delegation pretending to announce the overthrow of the Dame and the acknowledgment of the divinity of Blaise Darnley. Let the ambush be planned for any time or place, it could hardly fail. "The man is absolutely insane," he said, and urged the almost-certainty of the Bosun's swallowing any lie so long as it led down the fever-lit passageways of his mania.

"No," said Dame Hanna.

"Loss of life among your forces seems inevitable, but by sheer weight of numbers you could crush him and any guard he has with him."

"No," she repeated. They had stopped for the night at a side-road hamlet in the Dales of Lan. The old man in whose hut they were sheltering crouched in his corner, almost overcome with awe by the presence of both the Dame herself and one of the Great Men under his rough roof.

"It hardly matters, even, how many men are left aboard the ship. Without Blaise, they won't be able to act together against us. In all probability they'd take the ship and go."

But Hanna would not yield by the breadth of a tan's hair. Jory's scheme ran right in the face of the hereditary code of warrior honor, a code both incredibly involved and brutally simple. And she, the Dame, the High Keeper of the King's Castles and head of Sept Sartissa, was the epitome of that code. And to all Jory's urging and entreaty, she continued to say, "No."

All next day, as they circled the Dales, he kept up his persuasion. But he could not persuade her by

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an ell. Word of their coming had preceded them; they were met at last by her white palanquin — not the same in which she had been captured, but another — and a corps of warriors. While they stayed prostrate in the dust of the road, she turned to Jory.

"Warlock," she said, "you are not without courage of your own. I am not without gratitude. I wish there were some way... But you are men, and men of a strange people. While you are here the Land can know no rest. It would be best if you made your escape from this world while I, who am and must be your enemy, am engaged against this other warlock who is both your enemy and mine."

She mounted to her seat. He took hold of a corner of it. "There is still truce between us for the balance of the week," he reminded her.

She nodded. She had covered her cropped hair with her battle-mask, thrown back. Once again she sat as he had first seen her, erect and expressionless. "Your coming has caused a disruption in the proper order of things which may not be set right for a hundred years. The balance of the week remains for our truce. And when it is over — warlock, beware."

The bearers swung the great palanquin to their shoulders. The corps of warriors rose from the dust. The procession swung off.

Jory did not remain to watch them out of sight. His craft, his scheme, his venture into the enemy's camp, his rescue of the native leader most hostile to him — all, seemingly, had come to naught. It now remained to be seen how much he could do with what little time might remain.

All along the way back to the Holy Court he passed messengers running with the news. Blaise Barnley had attacked here — attacked there — destroyed this place — burned that one. The smoke of his destructions rose between land and sky almost wherever one looked. So far, he still returned to the ship after each foray. Jory felt that he himself must do whatever he could before Darnley made his base of operations outside *Persephone*. When that occurred, he would know no further chance of the ship's leaving Valentine's Planet would exist, for the invader would then have fully committed himself to remain.

A familiar face but long-unseen one awaited him at the Court. Crammer.

The manufacture of the necessary fuel had succeeded. The pettyboat had left its island and was now set down on the northern part of the Scrub-lands, where — for the time being, at least — it would be safe from any attack. "I wanted to get to see something of the place before we leave, Mr. Cane," Crammer said. "So Captain Rond let me bring the word while he and Lockharn stayed there with the boat. Locky, he's tickled silly. All he talks about is how he's going to pension out and buy that farm."

Levvis, Mars, Duston and Storm gathered around, unsmiling. They returned Cane's greetings in sub-

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dued tones. Rahan — Little Joe — was there, and so was O-Narra. Her embrace had been brief.

One word kept repeating itself. "'Leave'? The captain is ready to leave?"

Crammer nodded, handed Jory the official communique which Captain Marrus Rond had given him for delivery. Jory scanned it quickly. It was in the officialese which Rond had reverted to, now that some semblance of the old order was within his reach once more.

But it all was contained in one word.

Leave.

"Mr. Cane," said Levvis somberly, "if the Old Man really tries to enforce that order, well, I'm awfully sorry, but I guess there'll be another mutiny."

Mars said, "And this time he can have the pettyboat all to himself. Or — well, anyway, *I'm* not going. Are you?"

Storm, to whom he had spoken, shook his head. "I joined for adventure. Where is there more of it than here? Besides . . ." His voice trailed away as he turned to take the hand of the young woman who had come up to him, silently.

"Same thing with me, same with Levvis. Same thing with you, Mr. Cane?" Duston asked.

O-Narra said nothing. She just looked at him. And Rahan-Joe, "A mistake. Rond-Father will not leave us."

Turning to Crammer, Jory said, "This matter can't be done via proxy. Tell the captain that we'll have to speak to him personally. Here. No — wait. Don't put it like that. Say that protocol requires he take personal farewell of King Mukanahan, and that we'll wait for him here."

Crammer nodded, slowly. "I'll tell him, Mr. Cane. But . . . look. You fellows can do as you like. You been out here all this time, you made contacts, put down roots. I haven't. I just stayed there on the island, like I was told. Maybe if I'd been in your place — But I wasn't. So I'm going back. So is Locky, so's Captain Rond. I don't know how long it will take us. We'll have to zig-zag, planet-hop, before we get to a Guild ship or installation. But we'll get back.

"And when we do, we make our report. You know it will have to be a true one, we couldn't take the chance of faking it and being found out. What happens then? Maybe now, maybe after a while, the Directorate starts looking. Mainly, they'll be looking for *Persephone.* And they'll be looking for Darnley and his men. But they'll be looking for *you,* too." He paused, his next words striking home. "From their point of view there might not be any difference."

Crammer's departure left them silent and somber. Then said Mars, "We could hide out. Maybe they wouldn't stick around to find us."

"Maybe," said Levvis.

"And if they did, maybe they'd just cashier us, cancel pension, turn us loose."

And once more, "Maybe." Nobody voiced what everybody knew — that mutiny or desertion might

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merit "such penalties and punishment as the court may see fit to direct"; that courts in the past had fired mutineers out the spacelocks, marooned them on the lifeless moons of Halcyon *beta*, sentenced deserters to life in the vast frozen prison camp which was the southern polar hemisphere of Trismegistus. Rahan-Joe did now know any of this, but he drew close to Levvis and embraced his arm, and some of the women began to weep.

Jory said, "I will talk with Captain Rond. This isn't a cut-and-dried situation. Maybe I can persuade him to put you . . . us . . . on detached duty here, indefinite term."

And once again someone said, "*Maybe. . .*"

The different tone, this time — doubt, warning, menace — brought Jory's head up with a snap. "I hope no one has ideas of offering any violence to the commanding officer," he said. The others looked at him. And then, silently, the group broke up.

Darnley against everyone, the Dame against all off-planet men, the pettyboat crew against Darnley and the Dame and now it seemed Mars, Storm, Levvis and Duston against Rond and Crammer and Lockharn. And with Jory Cane right in the middle.

XVII

"Why must you go?" O-Narra said, stroking his face. Jory took her hand and kissed it.

In a low, troubled voice, he said, "It is the law, the code we live by. You should know. It isn't too much different from your own."

She made the gesture of negation. "My own? Code and law? That of the warriors, the Great Ladies? No, Jory, not my own. Not since the day you fired the smoking brand which brought me down and killed my sword. Sword-Narra had a code and a law. O-Narra has neither. She has only Jory."

They sat in an embrasure in a stone porch extending the length of one of the courtyards. Long crimson *lo* pods grew from the blue-green leafy trees, and some tiny creature whose skin blended in with leaf and bark trilled in the branches. The air was cool and fresh and smelled a little of wet dust and a little of the spicy odor of the *lo* pods.

"'*The great men rule in equity,*'" she quoted the ancient old hedge-priestess of the outlaw band to him. "How can this be if you leave us?"

Jory's smile was wry. He got up, lifted her to her feet. Her pale skin, jade-green eyes and red-gold hair seemed beautiful beyond his capacity to say her nay. "The rest of the prophecy hasn't been fulfilled, either. I don't know, O-Narra. Not yet. But I'm going to find out . . . not about that old daddy's tale of a prophecy, but about myself. And what I have to do. Come."

They walked together through the beautiful courts, beautiful from a thousand years of enforced peace, to where Rond awaited them. Crammer was with him. Levvis, Storm, Mars, stood apart. Lockharn was not there. Captain Rond wore a fresh uniform, the golden circles

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of rank upon its breast. He straightened as Jory came up.

"You are out of uniform, First Officer," he said, stiffly.

"Sir."

"However. What is this you have to say to me?"

Jory said it. He asked Rond if they could not stay and assist the people of the Great North Land against the constantly increasing depredations of the mutineers. "Unfortunately, no," was his answer. "It is against Guild polity to become embroiled in local affairs, and I could hardly claim in justification that we were trying to regain the main ship. Excuse me."

He flicked his finger against the pectoral communicator, raised Lockharn, directed him to start the pettyboat and put her down in the great meadow south of the Holy Court. "And, Lockharn, go easy. Don't strain the engines. We have a long, long trip ahead of us — No, First Officer, I couldn't permit risking the men, the pettyboat, or *Persephone* herself. The Directorate may well want to attempt recovery of the main ship, you know. Besides the hull and the engines, the cargo, I believe, is still intact. Six men-of-war with the new force-field units could probably recover her intact."

Jory started to play his last card. "Then, sir —"

Lockharn's voice broke in. "— terrible, that's terrible? Captain? Do you know what they're *do*ing?" He sounded on the verge of tears. "Not only have they burned the crops, those dirty dogs in *Persephone*, but they've poisoned the fields! I can *see* it! They'll never bear any more — it's not *right* to treat farmland that way!"

"Systemsman, don't use the communicator unless ordered to."

"But, Captain —"

Jory broke in. "Then, sir, since Guildships will be coming this way, couldn't you leave the rest of us here on detached duty, indefinite term, as observers? You and Crammer and Lockharn could manage the pettyboat quite well."

Rond's look was frosty. "Mr. Cane, you and every other man who has formed a liaison knew full well that it must be of a temporary nature. I cannot —"

Lockharn's voice burst out once once more, with, "Oh, my God! There won't be anyone left alive here if this goes on! Ruins, poisoned fields, fire and smoke, all around. And I can see *Persephone!* Her ramp is down and there's a whole mob on it, probably getting ready to go out and kill more innocent people!"

Rond ordered him off the air, but the man swept on unheedingly, describing the devastation on all sides. Then he broke off to say, Oh! They must be out in full force — the Septs! This is *awful.* Blaise will just wipe them out . . . and even if they won, they'd just put things back like before. That's not right, either. Every man ought to own his own farm —"

Rond spoke sharply, while Lockharn was still speaking, and against the background of a new sound . . .

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one which Jory could not identify. Not until both Rond and Lockharn fell silent, not till then did he recognize it; but even before then it made the little hairs on his flesh stand off from it.

Harsh, high, flat and strident, it resolved itself into a voice, a voice saying over and over again, "*Attack! Attack! Attack! I order you to attack! Crewmen, off the ramp! Off the ramp! Down on the ground! Do you hear me? Those are my orders! Blaise Darnley's! Blaise Darnley orders you! Blaise Darnley is God! Attack! Attack At*—"

Rond, Jory, all the men, were struck silent. The voice had utterly ceased to be human. It was madness incarnate. Rond was the first to recover his voice. "Lockharn!" he cried. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Full speed here! Belay the previous orders — get here as quick as you can and get us out of here before that madman destroys us!"

In the silence it seemed to Jory that he could hear and identify the heavy breathing of each individual man. *Terrible!* Lockharn was correct in that, all right, and in his summing up the choice of evils. No one could wish Darnley victorious, but — supposing the not likely — if the Septs should win, what then? Why, then, back to the rule by the aristocracy of women warriors, rule by Sept and fief and high-born, sword-born Lady; the peasant bound to his plow and the servitor to his task, forever, forever, with ceaseless endeavor, toiling for others.

He was interrupted again. The voice had fallen low, narrowed to a thin streak of sound, but still it gave him the horrors. "'*Madman'? who was that? Rond, wasn't it? Marrus Rond. Mistake to leave you alive. Came here to fix that. No report from you to Guild wanted. Other things here. Place had weak god. Needed strong one. Me. Forget you. Take care of you next. Blaise Darnley. God. Blaise* —"

And then Lockharn, very soft, very calm, very reasonable. "Now you see, captain. I can't let that go on. Nobody could. I hope you fellows will look out for the farmers, see they get treated right . . ."

A look of dreadful fright creased Rond's face. "Lockharn!" he cried. "*What are you going to do? Don't*—"

"Watch out, Bosun. I'm coming to get you."

Rond shouted Blaise screamed, Lockharn spoke softly, softly. The pettyboat came into view, high, far away.

Then all sound was cut off. The communicators seemed dead. Silently, up from the horizon, the *Persephone* hove into view. She went straight up, hovered. Jory, Rond and every man reached for his farseer. The great ship's ramp was still out. It was crowded, jammed, packed with the struggling figures which fought and tore and trampled one another as they tried all at once to gain the safety of the stairs and elevators. As they watched, more than one, trying to claw and scramble over the tight-wedged bodies of his fellows, lost balance and fell

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overside, tumbling and pirhouetting through the air. The ship tilted into the incline, gave a great swerve and turn — it could have only been deliberate: Blaise Darnley ridding himself of his unwilling crew — and the whole mass of men went sliding, clutching, clutching, semaphoring with arms and legs, down, down . . .

Levvis swore in a faint voice. Duston dropped his farseer. Mars went sick. The ship drew in its ramp as a dog draws in its tongue.

Whether Blaise himself was at the control, or some member of his Praetorian Guard, or (as it looked, as it seemed it might) if two or perhaps more than two were struggling for the controls, no one on the the ground could say. But *Persephone* yawed, girated, stood down on an erratic course, came out of incline, went into it again.

And all the while the pettyboat climbed.

For a moment, it seemed to rest, to hover, to brood upon the wind. Then it flashed as it turned in the sun. "Here I come," said Lockharn, softly. So close was his voice, so wrapt in the awesome drama of the scene were his mates below, that it seemed for a second that he was there, there, in the midst of them, and not a distant voice brought near by the magic of the communicator.

The pettyboat came swooping down the air like a falcon in stoop upon its prey. The great ship broke loose from its veering and careening, started — and the boom, the blast, broke harsh and loud upon their ears—at increased speed and at a sharp oblique—

And the pettyboat rammed her between amidship and the engines.

One fraction of a second the black hole yawned. Then hole, boat, ship, all — all was lost in the flash of the explosion, the fiery convulsion, billowing, burning, burning —

— falling —

— falling —

Sound upon sound, noise echoing noise. And then the great column of smoke and fire blotting out horizon and filling sky.

And the noise and the sound of that filled the world.

XIX

It was long, long before any of them moved from the spot where they had been standing. Mars was the first to speak. "Poor old Lockharn," he said.

"Well," said Storm, echoing a phrase as old as the age of space, the Technic period itself, but now almost incredibly appropriate; "Well . . . he bought the farm."

Rond stared at the pillar of cloud and fire. His face was white as snow, his mouth opened and closed like a fish's mouth. There was a stone bench a few feet away. He moved like a man about to faint, almost fell, sat down heavily. He looked up, looked around, spread his hands in a gesture of absolute helplessness.

"All over," he said. "All gone. No hope. No hope."

Rahan-Joe put his hands on the man's bowed shoulders. "The world is still here," he said. "It will still need you, Rond-Father, you and

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your wisdom. Now you are a part of us."

Rond's head nodded — but whether in assent, or whether in confusion and bewilderment, they could not tell. "Poor old Locky," Duston said. "He did it for us. I don't know if any of us would have done it for him."

The courtyard had been filling up with silent people. Now there was a movement in the crowd, which gave way to allow someone through. It was an old, old woman, all in black — the priestess of the People of the Forest, Nelsa's outlaw band. The crone tottered up to them and bowed, her hands cupped together. "The prophecy . . ."

Heads nodded, faces mirrored her emotions. "How is that?" Jory asked.

It was O-Narra who answered him. "'*The great bird slays its dam, Heaven and Earth burn, the Great Men dwell in the Land and rule in equity.*' You see, Jory, the rest of it has been fulfilled. And now you will stay here, all of you."

There seemed no doubt of that. They had no means of departure, and no means of making of any. They were back in pre-Technic times. Their own scientific and technological knowledge and ability rested on the top of a pyramid, of which the base was utterly destroyed.

There was no point in looking for fissable materials now, or even petroleum. Borax was once again nothing more than the bitter salt of the desert, to be used for religious rituals and to soften water. The power packs would last a while, and their knives would outlast them. All they had, in the long run, to set them apart from the people of the Land, was their outlook upon the world, and their memories of what men might do . . . might, having done once, do again — if not now, then at a future date.

That was all. But it was by no means inconsiderable.

Persephone would be marked down in the Guild registries as *Over-due*. After a while the Directorate would have her charted route checked for wreckage; then, finding none, finding no traces or reports of her or her crew anywhere that the Guild's knowledge extended, she would be listed as *Believed Missing*. The Directorate was short on both sentiment and imagination. No expeditions would be sent out to places which were merely astronomical sightings. It was not a period of expansion, and there were no signs of a change in this. Chances that they would ever see another starship in the skies of Valentine's Planet were infinitely remote.

Here they were. And it was up to them to make the best of it.

For a while the Land lay numb. The crash of *Persephone* had killed not only her own crew but almost the entire army of the Septs, including the obdurate Dame herself.

Here and there the survivors of the invaded districts crept out of hiding and looked around them in wonder. Elsewhere, out of habit and out of awareness of necessity, the people tended their crops and herds.

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Occasionally some miraculously surviving member of the warrior class would be seen, no more certain of what to do than anyone else. The Sept cities lay quiet; in the unharried fiefs the widowered Lords sat in their empty halls; husbands and prettyboys waited for the women who would never return. There was energy and initiative enough for the rites of mourning, after it was realized there would be no return, but not for much more... The Land, for a while, lay numb.

At length King Mukanahan sent out the message that he would summon a great council, the first such in a thousand years. He set as the time for it the approaching Solstice, always a festive season and a time of pilgrimage to the Holy Court. Once or twice a courier in scarlet and black, white band fastened to her helmet, and a sprig of leaves in her empty scabbard, came to the Court; and it was known that overtures towards attaining to the now-vacant High Keepership had been made by some surviving Great Lady.

It was known, too, that the Holy Presence had not been pleased to make any reply.

And many people, of both sexes and of all classes, not knowing where else to turn, clinging automatically to the sole remaining symbol of authority, flocked to the vast precincts of the Court even in advance of the time for the council. There were supplies enough to feed them if they had stayed for years.

"The people still pray and the sun still rises," O-Narra said to Jory.

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"But other things will never be the same again."

"I suppose not," Jory said. "Levvis tells me that his wife is expecting a child. He picked up some ideas about boatbuilding on Humboldt's Two Worlds, one of which is mostly water. He says that he intends to settle on the River Lin when the council is over, and try to teach the boatsmen there what he knows."

O-Narra nodded. Slowly a smile crept over her face, and she said, "It is not only Levvis's wife who is expecting a child." He looked up at her quickly. She nodded and said. "I feel life stirring within me. And I am sure that it will be a man-child, and of his father's size when he is fully-grown.

Too full of emotion for words, he kissed her, and they were silent for a long time. Then she said again, "Other things will never be the same. Many men who were the plural mates of a Great Lady have taken each of them a new wife. There have not been enough men to go around for generations, and each generation there were fewer. Some of the men have been doing something we have never even heard of, except in old daddy's tales. Some of the men have taken more than one wife each."

They sat on the mossy verge of a stone pool, watching tiny blue water-creatures dart around, in and out of the shadows of the leaning *lo* trees, watched the sun catching the ripples of the surface. Jory nodded slowly. "Polygamy. It makes sense, under the circumstances."

Her next words were even more surprising. She told him that it made sense not only for the men of the Land. Levvis, too, must take many wives. And Mars, and Storm, Duston, Crammer. And even Rond. "If he is not too old," she added. "But I do not think he is too old, Jory — do you?"

He smiled slightly. "I shouldn't think so. But why do you say they must, O-Narra?"

Her manner was matter-of-fact, but quite sincere, as she told him why. Evidently she had thought it all out to her own satisfaction. The people of the Land needed the vigor of the new Great Men. Their blood-lines were old and could only profit by the addition of fresh ones. It would be certain to mean more men-children, since — as she had been told — among Jory's people there were more males born than females. And the children of these unions, the men-children in particular, would be a further source of fresh and vigorous blood. Their sons must also take many wives. They would thus spread not only the greater physical vigor of the new men but also their greater knowledge. And finally, not least, by substituting polygamy for polyandery an absolute end could be written to the old aristocratic system.

He mused on this. Something occurred to him. "You say that Levvis must do this, and Storm and Mars and Duston and Crammer and even Rond. Then—"

"Yes! Then Jory must do it, too!"

Since the debacle he had been trying to accustom himself to the

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fact that his old world, his old multiplicity of worlds, was gone forever. That he was here, forever, on a world altogether new, altogether different. One thing above all others had helped him to make this adjustment: O-Narra — a new world all her own. And now O-Narra was refusing to have him all to herself!

She was proposing to share him, to restore to him — or, rather, to provide him with — a new multiplicity of worlds. Would he himself, had conditions been reversed, been capable of such unselfishness? He knew that he would not.

"I think . . . I think . . . " He found himself stumbling over his tongue as well as his thoughts. "I think that since you feel this way. . . that you should make the first choice . . ."

She said, "I have."

"You — Oh. Who?"

"Nelsa. She is a strong woman who will give you strong children. And she is sensible enough to prefer a share of one good man to all of a poor one. Let her pick your third wife, and let the third one pick the fourth, and —"

"Hold on!" he exclamed. "Hold on! Don't rush me! Uh . . . why don't you talk to Captan Rond?"

They found him walking in the garden of his quarters, walking back and forth with a stately air. He had recovered from his period of great shock, was looking perhaps better than Jory recalled having seen him look since they arrived here on Valentine's World. He greeted them affably.

"I'm particularly glad to see you, Cane, just at this moment. I have many things to tell you. Now that we are likely to be here for the foreseeable future, it behooves us all to take stock of our situation and our resources. We aren't the only ones who've been shaken up, you know, and forced to re-evaluate our lives. Everyone on this continent has had to. I've spent a lot of time talking to King Mukanahan. Despite the narrowness of his life and upbringing he's by no means unintelligent, you know. And I thnk I may say that he found in me a fellow philosopher. I've done my best to give him some understanding of the universe we know and of its other inhabitants and how they developed. For example, my information dealt with the history of our own peoples on the old Homeworld, their rude beginnings, the strife and struggles of empire, the fumbling and the bungling of democracy, and then the commencement of the Technic period and the development of the Academic Guilds, the best system of government known to man."

Jory had decided against trying to follow or accompany Rond as he walked up and down the garden. He and O-Narra sat on the low wall and watched and listened. Now and then, as the older man stopped and looked at him inquiringly, Jory said, "Yes, sir." And then Rond was off again.

It was by now quite obvious said Rond that the old system of government here was gone forever. Not enough of the old ruling caste of warrior-aristocrats remained to re-

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institute the former ways of life. This was, of course, a good thing. Still and all, there was much to be said for the old way, barbaric though its expression was. It gave stability. Discipline. Cohesion. And enough respect for it still remained to provide a foundation for a new structure which would combine the best of the old with the best of the new...

"Are you following me in all this, Cane?"

"Yes, sir."

Rond nodded, continued his conversational walkings. First of all, he said, the King would have to abdicate. There was no need for a monarchy, not even a figureheaded one. The obvious form of new government should take was of an oligarchy, like the Directorates of the Academic Guilds. Eventually, in fact, an Academy would be set up to inculcate the proper principles. Now — who should comprise the oligarchy, the directorate? The answer was obvious. Rond and his men, for one. And the surviving members of the warrior-aristocracy, for another.

They would unite in more than rule. They would unite in marriage. Breed a new race. Their children would marry amongst themselves, and only amongst themselves. Doubtless the male genes would prove pre-potent and the male children be of normal size. Any exceptions would be rigidly excluded.

"Now is the time to start, Cane," Rond said, a glow of conviction animating his face. "Now! While the people are still quiescent and willing to do as they are told. Before anarchic notions get spread abroad. And think of the future! This is, after all, only a single continent. There are other continents, other countries. We can extend our rule over the whole planet, eventually."

Jory asked, "Have you told all this to the King?"

"I have."

"He knows he must abdicate?"

"Yes. I think he's glad of the opportunity. I could see that he was deeply impressed by what I had to tell him. The so-called council will be held shortly, but it will have no duty other than to accept the decision and to see that it's carried out. I have sent communications to the surviving Great Ladies, and I don't doubt that a perfect accord can be reached wth them.

"As for our own men, that's your task, Cane. I expect they will jump at the chance. After all, what were they before? Now they can be arstocrats, oligarchs, directors. It means great responsibilities, stern self-sacrificing conduct, hard work. But it will be done."

Eventually, after more of the same, more *Yes sirs* punctuating the perambulations, Jory and O-Narra got away.

It was late afternoon. Somewhere a gong sounded, voices murmured faintly and rhythmically. The smoke of cooking fires rose thinly on the cooling air.

To O-Narra, Jory said, "Was this what you had in mind?"

Clear green eyes sober in her face, she made with her hand the gesture of negation. "Sword-Narra is

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dead, and I am glad of it," she said. "I would not want her to come to life once more. And you — the father of my child which is to be?"

He took her hands. "I have no desire to be Sword-Jory," he said.

XX

Levvis rejected the idea entirely. "All's I want to do is sit on the banks of that river," he said, "and build my boats. Seems as though I've always wanted something like that, but I never knew it before. Well, I know it now, and that's it. I got no intention of becoming a member of any ruling class."

Mars said he was with Levvis. A man who can use his hands can make out real good here, Jory. Do you know these people have never even heard of either windmills or water-wheels? Remember how many of both there were back there on Regius Two, in the Lace Pattern? I always got a kick out of hanging around and watching how they worked. Now I can make them, myself. No politics for me."

Crammer said, "I'm still a Guildsman. I take orders. Yes, First Officer — tell Captain Rond that I'm with him. All the way."

And Duston stood there with his head bowed a long time. Finally he said, "I don't know. The notion of living in a castle and running things my way seems kind of exciting. But . . . I can't forget old Locky's last words about seeing that the farmers here get a break. I guess I'll just wait and see."

Jory had some trouble finding Storm, located him at last as he came back from a one-man mountain climbing expedition. His reaction was simple. "I joined for adventure. If the skipper's scheme is for me to sit in an office and do desk work, nix. But if this new notion will keep me active, then I might take him up on it . . ."

Sire Jahan, the small equerry, was as cordial as ever. He listened to Jory's request for a meeting with the King; then said, "I will present your request as soon as the great council is over. To present it now would be impossible. The Holy Presence has retired to prepare himself for the event. And no one may interrupt his fasting, his meditation, or his prayer." He bowed, there in the room with the dim blue tapestries upon the ancient walls.

Someone was waiting to see Jory when he returned to his quarters. Nelsa . . .

He had almost forgotten her. It was plain that she had not forgotten him. "I am still waiting, Giant, for questions to be answered," was her greeting.

"Questions cannot be answered, Nelsa, before they are asked," he said.

She smiled her quick smile, but there was something impatient in her expression. "Let us not play with words, then," she declared. "Are you willing for me to be one of your wives?"

"I am, Nelsa."

"Would your leader include me and my outlaws in his new class of rulers?"

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Jory hesitated. "I don't know," he admitted. "But I know *him*. I'm inclined to doubt it."

"You have given me one straight answer, Giant, and an answer which is no answer at all. So now hear *my* answers. I will be your wife among other wives if things are to be no more as they were before. Or, I will accept a share in your captain's way of rule. But I will not bow down to a new caste which would exclude me as the former one did. Nor will any of the women of the forest. Now you have my own answers. Perhaps there will be other questions to fit my answers, at the great council. Until then—Giant, farewell."

She left him troubled and uncertain. But O-Narra was there to comfort him.

The scholars and sages of the Holy Court had searched every annal and record in the old libraries the precedents on choosing the great council. The method finally arrived at, was for every group of one hundred to select one of their number by lot. Those thus selected divided themselves, in turn, into groups of one hundred, from each of which one person was elected by voice vote. So the process went—lot, election, lot, until only one hundred remained. These were seated in front of the multitude facing the steps of the Temple of the Clouds. To the right was Rond and his men; to the left were the few surviving Great Ladies, including Moha, saved by the Dame's orders that she be confined to her fief.

A group of priests sang their litany in the Temple Hall, offering salt and borax to the fires. The scent of their incense drifted out. And then the great gong sounded, the multitude knelt and bowed down, and King Mukanahan, his small figure almost lost in the fullness of the elaborate ceremonial robes, preceded by ornately clad appeared at the topmost step and mounted to his thronelike seat. The gong sounded once more. The crowd arose. A chamberlain knelt and presented him his address upon a golden plate. He took it, and began to read.

There was no sound throughout the entire audience.

The opening was the traditional one of greeting to his brothers, Night and Day, Land and Sea and Air; and of thanks to them for their continual gifts to him and his people. He spoke next of the thousand years during which the High Keeper of the King's Castles had ruled in his name. "Since the events which are known to all," he said, "my Castles have been without a High Keeper. I have been asked to select a new one. I will not do so. We have no need of castles now, nor they, of Keepers. Remembering the prophecy that when the great bird should slay her dam and Heaven and Earth should burn, the Great Men would rule in equity, I have consulted with the oldest of the new Great Men now among us. I have learned much.

"But I have yet much to learn. And much to do. This, our Great North Land, cannot return to the ways of old. I do not feel myself

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equal to guide it in the new ways it must follow. I am no longer young, and I am weary. Let this council speak the will of all the people. But let it be guided by a new rule."

He turned to his left, beckoned. Rond went even straighter. In a low voice he said, "Come with me, Cane. But keep one step behind."

Together they walked across the open space and up the steps. Jory was in silent misery. He caught the King's eye. Suddenly, he knew what he had to do; and he knew that the King knew it, too. He took two steps at a stride, then one quick step more. Mukanahan arose and moved to one side. And Jory sat in his place.

He nodded to Rond, frozen in more astonishment than outrage. Te nodded to the scarlet and black figures. He nodded to his men. Then he arose and bowed to the great council and to the greater multitude behind it.

Jory the King rose and spoke.

"Let no one be my enemy," he said. "For I will be no one's enemy. We shall be one people, for only therein lies the way that the Land may live in justice and in peace."

END

A lively, illustrated explanation of a useful and fascinating branch of mathematics

Experiments in Topology

by STEPHEN BARR

"Until Barr turned his thoughts toward topology it had never occured to anyone that closed, one-sided surfaces such as Klein bottles and projective planes could be made simply by cutting and pasting sheets of paper . . . Yet it would be unfair to say that his book is no more than a collection of topological recreations. The play is mixed with important mathematics, and there are occasional asides that plunge into deep waters."

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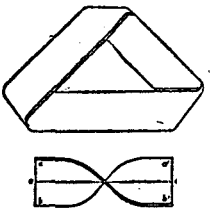

"A mathematician named Klein
Thought the Moebius band was divine.
Said he: 'If you glue
The edges of two,
You'll get a weird bottle like mine.'"

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WHAT WEAPONS TOMORROW?

by JOSEPH WESLEY

Here's a preview of tomorrow's war, the way it might happen—but won't!

The time is 1980, give or take a few years, depending on your analysis of the rate of growth of the military technological explosion that started with the nineteenth century. You are extrapolating progress ahead about sixteen years, which is approximately one full cycle in military hardware. Most Naval ships last longer in front line service, but their armament does not.

In the fighting of the early nineteen-sixties, the weapons that won World War II could still be found, but only in backward areas or second-line fighting forces. Nevertheless, nothing in front line service — from helicopters to jet planes, to intercontinental ballistic missiles, to nuclear propelled warships — that could be seen in 1964, was so new and different that it had not at least been dreamed of by the end of the second World War. Similarly, nothing that can be found in use here today in 1980 was beyond the ability of earnest contemplation, in 1964, to conceive.

Politically, in the Year of Our Lord One Nine Eight Zero, the stalemate continues. Nuclear deterrence remains effective in the absence of any uncountered major technological tour de force

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by either side. The continuing fear of both antagonists is the possibility that the enemy will come up with a break-through — either defensive or offensive — that in its time frame can be calculated to be an ultimate weapon. It is the calculation, by the way, and not the fact, that is of first importance . . . because it is with the calculation and not the fact that war begins.

We can be sure of one thing: a weapon that is available in 1980 in sufficient numbers to break a stalemate is, in fact, being at least thought about in 1964.

This is true if the earlier statement, that such thinking is possible, is true. It is cheaper to think of possibilities than it is to develop systems, especially in peacetime. And survival can depend on such thinking. Extrapolation to 1980, in order to explore the possible dangers to safety, performed in the framework of the fringe areas of 1960, may be able to pinpoint the genuine dangers and remove false fears. If it is carefully done.

In this Spring of 1890, the the East European Federation, after an uncharacteristic publicity campaign, has commenced to boost in orbit a series of mammoth vehicles which, they declare, are manned Mars probes.

Unfortunately, they say, they are experiencing some difficulty with the orbital escape stages. This is requiring them to orbit their entire series of back-up vehicles — which our sky spies estimate could mount to a total of more than forty ships.

Our authorities are publicly bland concerning this matter, although a few newspaper pundits and a few Congressmen of the Administration's Party are proclaiming that the Mars flight, if it ever succeeds, will be of little scientific value; and a few newspaper pundits and a few Congressmen of the Opposition's Party are trumpeting that the mission, if it succeeds will reduce us to the status of a second class military power.

Privately, the civilian and military leaders of the Nation are in a state of extreme shock. One or another of our snooper satellites has passed close to each of these silent ships soon after it has reached orbit, and has photographed it from all angles and subjected it to the searching analysis of a battery of scientific instruments, with inconclusive results. We are unable to demonstrate that these vehicles are other than what they claim to be.

We dare not shoot down — or shoot up — manned ships which, it has been publicly declared, have only a peaceful mission. We cannot complete rendezvous with one of these ships and board it for direct examination. This is technically feasible, but would constitute Seizure and Search, as illegal in space in peacetime as it would be on the high seas, and far more public. We dare not commit such an unfriendly act unless we are certain that these ships are actually intended as weapons.

It would do us great harm in the continuing propaganda struggle, announce our public relations experts, if we boarded one and found it to

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be innocent. This, they say, may in fact be the enemy's plan — to draw us, so to speak, off side, and then force concessions from us elsewhere.

On the other hand, if we inspect and our suspicions are correct, the unveiling of the weapons will in itself probably make the enemy feel that he must use them. The more missiles that the enemy has orbited, therefore, the more dangerous it is to try to expose him.

So while we vacillate the deployment of manned vehicles continues until it is complete.

Then our enemy delivers his ultimatum. It is backed, he declares, by the uncounterable threat of his new satellites, which he now calmly admits are not Mars probes. Two of them, he announces, are elaborate battle control centers, crossing above our territories as well as their own at intervals of about one hundred and twenty minutes, with the Generals who are riding in them able to gather Intelligence by direct observation, and to evaluate and then act on it promptly through a series of direct communication links unaffected by normal terrestrial limitations.

Nineteen of the space vehicles are orbital defensive fortresses, bristling with weapons ready to destroy any of our own ICBM's, if we choose to launch them. They contain detection systems able to spot our missiles in seconds as they lift from their siloes — not limited by the visibility of the horizon — and to destroy them while they are most vulnerable, before the lower stages have completed the boost to maximum velocity and have dropped away.

The last nineteen of the ships are Dreadnaughts of Space — ready to unleash multi-megaton weapons against our cities and our countryside. Already at orbital speeds, they have a time-of-flight only a fraction of that required of our ICBM's that must lift from the ground, and then climb through the dense atmosphere near Earth at slow and vulnerable speeds to a near-orbital apogee before they can commence the re-entry plunge onto target.

We have given the enemy the High Ground. In aerospace as in land warfare of old, victory belongs to him who can gain and hold the High Ground.

The long stalemate is over, and deterrence is at an end. Before our own anti-satellite missiles can climb tediously out of the gravity well that surrounds the Earth to demolish these new weapons of the High Ground, they will already have accomplished their mission.

Of course, before we concede defeat, we must look at the other side — at our side.

It is possible that we have been expending our own technological energy toward improving our defenses. Recognizing that missiles limited to at most a few score of g's of acceleration would be hopelessly behind hand in any contest of this sort, our military scientists and engineering designers have concentrated on the use of electronics — of high-energy beams of destruction to accomplish the defensive task.

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These ravening pulses of energy aimed with enormous precision. The bolt of energy is potent enough, and there is sufficient coupling with the hulls of the space-ships, to inflict major damage; to make useless their own fighting systems. And with the electronic bullets travelling at the speed of light, there is no chance for the enemy to counter.

Energy of the required levels is generated by enormous horizontal antenna systems covering many square miles. Laid out on farm land and across highways and above villages, the twenty-mile-on-a-side antenna arrays do not interfere with normal use of the land, and are camouflaged so as to be invisible to photographic detection from spy satellites.

Each of the many thousands of separate elements of the antenna is separately powered. The individual transmissions are frequency and phase related, and provide a single highly coherent transmission. The beam is steered by the frequency and phase relationships. With antennas of this enormous size, the angular beam width in both planes can be made incredibly small. With beam agility, each such beam is made to sweep repeatedly through an assigned segment of the sky, using relatively low powers.

When a desired target is located, full power is applied. An antenna segment ten feet on a side supplies one kilowatt of energy to the system — a requirement that could have been met easily back in the Sixties. The total power, however, comes to an incredible three hundred and forty million horsepower of primary power. Even if we must assume only one per cent efficiency, one per cent of coupling of incident energy to the target, and a beam cross section a hundred times target size, more than three hundred horsepower is delivered continuously to the target for as long as the beam is applied. No target can withstand that!

So the enemy ships are destroyed, Right triumphs, Deterrence ends up being lost not by us but by the East European Confederation.

All of the foregoing is not merely a rather tired science fiction situation. Schemes such as these, and others that sound far less plausible, have been and are being thought about with serious intent.

But what about the weapon and counter-weapon that we have just encountered in our imaginary world of 1980? Do they, in particular, have to be taken seriously by our long range planners?

Well, no.

The flaw with the offensive scheme lies in the use of the words "High Ground". An orbiting vehicle does have an excellent position from which to spy on those below. And, of course, we do not have to wait until 1980 to find this use being made of satellites. However, the military concept of the High Ground did not develop primarily because of the view, but because of an advantageous position with respect to gravity.

Troops running up hill go slower and tire faster than do those who

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start from a position on the High Ground. Stones can be thrown more effectively down hill than up — and similarly, cannon sited on high ground outrange those of the enemy in the valley below, and are in excellent position to overcome any efforts of his to defilade.

An orbiting vehicle is not on high ground in this sense. It requires the expenditure of additional energy in order to put itself in the same position that it could have had with less initial energy expense: that of being on a trajectory that will intersect a spot on Earth. And unless the desired target is directly under the orbital path, a great deal of additional energy may be required.

An I.C.B.M. may be fired to any spot on earth, assuming adequate range capability, with less energy than would be required for it to achieve stable orbit, and can arrive on any target in less than one hour from the time of firing. The "High Ground" vehicle must use extra energy in order to climb free of the atmosphere and to remain there without danger of dipping into the region of rapid orbital decay. It must use extra energy to manage reentry. Unless the target is exactly in the orbital path, extra energy must be used to shift orbits, and the extra weight of propulsion which must also be lofted into orbit in order to accomplish this may be very large. In order to provide flexibility of target choice, this extra load must be carried, even if it turns out not to be needed. And even with this extra propulsion, it may be necessary to wait for several hours before any given target comes within reach.

Without possessing this reality of High Ground, then, the orbiting dreadnaughts would not shift the balance of deterrence. They would not be able to attack massively without warning. Nor, in the numbers described, could they be at all effective in preventing our own I.C.B.M.'s from flying.

Our postulated defense antennas also suffer from a concealed flaw that limits their possible effectiveness. It is not an impossible job to use phase and/or frequency relationships to steer the beam of a fixed antenna. In an enormous array such as has been described here, however, what might be called micro-weather would defeat the plan. Just as turbulent water distorts a beam of light shining up through it, so would the unpredictable variations of the fine-grain structure of local weather over the square miles covered by the antenna cause distortions that would make impossible the degree of accuracy required.

The particular confrontation that we have pictured here, then, can never take place. There are other possible combinations, however — almost without limit. And there are variations of those stated here that, with sufficient analysis might serve to resurrect some part of them.

For example, let us look once more at the East European Federation's space ships. Forget their use as offensive weapons, but look once more at the nineteen defensive ships. If we enormously increase the num-

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ber of them, leaving out the men and making them correspondingly smaller in size — in the interests of economic feasibility — then it might be possible for one or more of them to be in the vicinity wherever and whenever we might choose to launch an offensive I.C.B.M. They would then operate against our missiles in the early, most vulnerable, part of their trajectories.

Of course, such unmanned missiles as these might be systematically intercepted and inactivated — or even caused to shift allegiance — through the discreet use of manned satellite rendezvous vehicles.

Even the enormous antenna system might become feasible if a sufficiently accurate computerized predictor of all-altitude micro-weather could be developed.

No ideas can be automatically rejected out-of-hand. No concept can be considered too fantastic for possible future development. Laws of Nature cannot be flouted, but they can be circumvented, or even made to serve, in unexpected ways. Within the next few years we will have selected the systems that will be available to us in 1980 — and this need for selection is a continuing one, repeated over and over as the years go by.

Let us hope that our vision in the present will always be wide enough to encompass our needs in the future! END

Coming . . . Tomorrow!

A new writer, Robert Ray, leads off the next issue of *Worlds of Tomorrow* with a complete short novel entitled *Killer!* The "killer" of the story is a man, but he is also something other than a man. He is a weapon, a sort of aimed, armed and fueled ICBM, and he has no more control over when he explodes or who he destroys than the steel and plutonium of a nuclear weapon. We think you will enjoy *Killer!* — Ray's first appearance in print, at least in this country — but not. we predict, his last.

A. Bertram Chandler enters *Worlds of Tomorrow* in the same issue with a short novelette called *The Long Way;* J. T. McIntosh with a somewhat longer one, *The Kicksters.* And, of course, there will be more — as much more as we can squeeze into a format which continues to surprise us with the sheer volume of wordage it can hold.

And if you'd care to look a little farther ahead, there's something very special. For more than a decade Philip Jose Farmer has been working on a major theme, completing it in one form then, dissatisfied, withdrawing it and working it over afresh. Now it has come to flower. It will appear as a series in future issues of *Worlds of Tomorrow* — not a single story, but a number of them, all exploring different aspects of the theme. The first one is called *The Day of the Great Shout,* and we'll have it for you very soon.

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THE LITTLE BLACK BOX

by PHILIP K. DICK

Illustrated by SCHELLING

The man called Mercer could not even save his own life—but he could destroy Man's whole world!

I

Bogart Crofts of the State Department said, "Miss Hiashi, we want to send you to Cuba to give religious instruction to the Chinese population there. It's your Oriental background. It will help."

With a faint moan, Joan Hiashi reflected that her Oriental background consisted of having been born in Los Angeles and having attended courses at UCSB, the University at Santa Barbara. But she was technically, from the standpoint of training, an Asian scholar, and she had properly listed this on her job-application form.

"Let's consider the word *caritas*," Crofts was saying. "In your estimation, what actually does it mean, as Jerome used it? Charity? Hardly. But then what? Friendliness? Love?"

Joan said, "My field is Zen Buddhism."

"But everybody," Crofts protested

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in dismay, "knows what caritas means in late Roman usage. The esteem of good people for one another; that's what it means." His gray, dignified eyebrows raised. "Do you want this job, Miss Hiashi? And if so, why?"

"I want to disseminate Zen Buddhist propaganda to the Communist Chinese in Cuba," Joan said, "because—" She hesitated. The truth was simply, that it meant a good salary for her, the first truly high-paying job she had ever held. From a career standpoint, it was a plum. "Aw, hell," she said. "What is the nature of the One Way? I don't have any answer."

"It's evident that your field has taught you a method of avoiding giving honest answers," Crofts said sourly. "And being evasive. However—" He shrugged. "Possibly that only goes to prove that you're well trained and the proper person for the job. In Cuba you'll be running up against some rather worldly and sophisticated individuals, who in addition are quite well off even from the U.S. standpoint. I hope you can cope with them as well as you've coped with me."

Joan said, "Thank you, Mr. Crofts." She rose. "I'll expect to hear from you, then."

"I am impressed by you," Crofts said, half to himself. "After all, you're the young lady who first had the idea of feeding Zen Buddhist riddles to UCSB's big computers."

"I was the first to *do* it," Joan corrected. "But the idea came from a friend of mine, Ray Meritan. The gray-green jazz harpist."

"Jazz and Zen Buddhism," Crofts said. "State may be able to make use of you in Cuba."

TO Ray Meritan she said, "I have to get out of Los Angeles, Ray. I really can't stand the way we're living here." She walked to the window of his apartment and looked out at the monorail gleaming far off. The silver car made its way at enormous speed, and Joan hurriedly looked away.

If we only could suffer, she thought. That's what we lack, any real experience of suffering, because we can escape anything. Even this.

"But you are getting out." Ray said. "You're going to Cuba and convert wealthy merchants and bankers into becoming ascetics. And it's a genuine Zen paradox; you'll be paid for it." He chuckled. "Fed into a computer, a thought like that would do harm. Anyhow, you won't have to sit in the Crystal Hall every night listening to me play—if that's what you're anxious to get away from."

"No," Joan said, "I expect to keep on listening to you on TV. I may even be able to use your music in my teaching." From a rosewood chest in the far corner of the room she lifted out a .32 pistol. It had belonged to Ray Meritan's second wife, Edna, who had used it to kill herself, the previous February, late one rainy afternoon. "May I take this along?" she asked.

"For sentiment?" Ray said. "Because she did it on your account?"

"Edna did nothing on my ac-

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count. Edna liked me. I'm not taking any responsibility for your wife's suicide, even though she did find out about us — seeing each other, so to speak."

Ray said meditatively, "And you're the girl always telling people to accept blame and not to project it out on the world. What do you call your principle, dear? Ah." He grinned. "The Anti-paranoia Prinzip. Doctor Joan Hiashi's cure for mental illness; absorb all blame, take it all upon yourself." He glanced up at her and said acutely, "I'm surprised you're not a follower of Wilbur Mercer."

"That clown," Joan said.

"But that's part of his appeal. Here, I'll show you." Ray switched on the TV set across the room from them, the legless black oriental-style set with its ornamentation of Sung dynasty dragons.

"Odd you would know when Mercer is on," Joan said.

Ray, shrugging, murmured, "I'm interested. A new religion, replacing Zen Buddhism, sweeping out of the Middle West to engulf California. You ought to pay attention, too, since you claim religion as your profession. You're getting a job because of it. Religion is paying your bills, my dear girl, so don't knock it."

The TV had come on, and there was Wilbur Mercer.

"Why isn't he saying anything?" Joan said.

"Why, Mercer has taken a vow this week. Complete silence." Ray lit a cigarette. "State ought to be sending me, not you. You're a fake."

"At least I'm not a clown," Joan said, "Or a follower of a clown."

Ray reminded her softly, "There's a Zen saying, 'The Buddha is a piece of toilet paper.' And another. 'The Buddha often — "

"Be still," she said sharply. "I want to watch Mercer."

"You want to watch," Ray's voice was heavy with irony. "Is that what you want, for god's sake? No one *watches* Mercer; that's the whole point." Tossing his cigarette into the fireplace, he strode to the TV set; there, before it, Joan saw a metal box with two handles, attached by a lead of twin-cable wire to the TV set. Ray seized the two handles, and at once a grimace of pain shot across his face.

"What is it?" she asked, in anxiety.

"N-nothing." Ray continued to grip the handles. On the screen, Wilbur Mercer walked slowly over the barren, jagged surface of a desolate hillside, his face lifted, an expression of serenity — or vacuity — on his thin, middle-aged features. Gasping, Ray released the handles. "I could only hold them for forty-five seconds this time." To Joan, he explained, "This is the empathy box, my dear. I can't tell you how I got it — to be truthful I don't really know. *They* brought it by, the organization that distributes it — Wilcer, Incorporated. But I can tell you that when you take hold of these handles you're no longer watching Wilbur Mercer. You're actually participating in his apotheosis. Why, you're feeling what he feels."

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Joan said, "It looks like it hurts."

Quietly, Ray Meritan said, "Yes. Because Wilbur Mercer is being killed. He's walking to the place where he's going to die."

In horror, Joan moved away from the box.

"You said that was what we needed," Ray said. "Remember, I'm a rather adequate telepath; I don't have to bestir myself very much to read your thoughts. 'If only we could suffer.' That's what you were thinking, just a little while ago. Well, here's your chance, Joan."

"It's— morbid!"

"Was your thought morbid?"

"Yes!" she said.

Ray Meritan said, "Twenty million people are followers of Wilbur Mercer now. All over the world. And they're suffering with him, as he walks along toward Pueblo, Colorado. At least that's where they're *told* he's going. Personally I have my doubts. Anyhow, Mercerism is now what Zen Buddhism was once; you're going to Cuba to teach the wealthy Chinese bankers a form of asceticism that's already obsolete, already seen its day."

Silently, Joan turned away from him and watched Mercer walking.

"You know I'm right," Ray said. "I can pick up your emotions. You may not even be aware of them, but they're there."

On the screen, a rock was thrown at Mercer. It struck him on the shoulder.

Everyone who's holding onto his empathy box, Joan realized, felt that along with Mercer.

Ray nodded. "You're right."

"And — what about when he's actually killed?" She shuddered.

"We'll see what happens then," Ray said quietly. "We don't know."

II

TO Bogart Crofts, Secretary of State Douglas Herrick said, "I think you're wrong, Boge. The girl may be Meritan's mistress but that doesn't mean she knows."

"We'll wait for Mr. Lee to tell us," Crofts said irritably. "When she gets to Havana he'll be waiting to meet her."

"Mr. Lee can't scan Meritan direct?"

"One telepath scan another?" Bogart Crofts smiled at the thought. It conjured up a nonsensical situation: Mr. Lee reading Meritan's mind, and Meritan, also being a telepath, would read Mr. Lee's mind and discover that Mr. Lee was reading his mind, and Lee, reading Meritan's mind, would discover that Meritan knew — and so forth. Endless regression, winding up with a fusion of minds, within which Meritan carefully guarded his thoughts so that he did not think about Wilbur Mercer.

"It's the similarity of names that convinces me," Herrick said. "Meritan, Mercer. The first three letters —"

Crofts said, "Ray Meritan is not Wilbur Mercer. I'll tell you how we know. Over at CIA, we made an Ampex video tape from Mercer's telecast, had it enlarged and analyzed. Mercer was shown against the usual dismal background of cactus

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plants and sand and rock...you know."

"Yes" Herrick said, nodding. "The Wilderness, as they call it."

"In the enlargement something showed up in the sky. It was studied. It's not Luna. It's a moon, but too small to be Luna. Mercer is not on Earth. I would guess that he is not a terrestrial at all."

Bending down, Crofts picked up a small metal box, carefully avoiding the two handles. "And these were not designed and built on Earth. The entire Mercer Movement is null-T all the way, and that's the fact we've got to contend with."

Herrick said, "If Mercer is not a Terran, then he may have suffered and even died before, on other planets."

"Oh, yes," Crofts said. "Mercer — or whatever his or its real name is — may be highly experienced in this. But we still don't know what we want to know." And that of course was, What happens when Mercer dies? What happens to those people holding onto the handles of their empathy boxes?

Crofts seated himself at his desk and scrutinized the box resting directly before him, with its two inviting handles. He had never touched them, and he never intended to. But —

"How soon will Mercer die?" Herrick asked.

"They're expecting it some time late next week."

"And Mr. Lee will have gotten something from the girl's mind by then, you think? Some clue as to where Mercer really is?"

"I hope so," Crofts said, still seated at the empathy box but still not touching it. It must be a strange experience, he thought, to place your hands on two ordinary-looking metal handles and find, all at once, that you're no longer yourself; you're another man entirely, in another place, laboring up a long, dreary inclined plain toward certain extinction. At least, so they say. But hearing about it...what does that actually convey? Suppose I tried it for myself.

The sense of absolute pain... that was what appalled him, held him back.

It was unbelievable that people could deliberately seek it out, rather than avoiding it. Gripping the handles of the empathy box was certainly not the act of a person seeking escape. It was not the avoidance of something but the seeking of something. And not of pain as such; Crofts knew better than to suppose that the Mercerites were simple masochists who desired discomfort. It was, he knew, the meaning of the pain which attracted Mercer's followers.

The followers were suffering for something.

Aloud, he said to his superior, "They want to suffer as a means of denying their private, personal existences. It's a communion in which they all suffer and experience Mercer's ordeal together." Like the Last Supper, he thought. That's the real key: the communion, the participation that is behind all religion. Or ought to be. Religion binds men to-

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gether in a sharing, corporate body, and leaves everyone else on the outside.

Herrick said, "But primarily it's a political movement, or must be treated as such."

"From our standpoint," Crofts agreed. "Not theirs."

The intercom on the desk buzzed and his secretary said, "Sir, Mr. John Lee is here."

"Tell him to come in."

The tall, slender young Chinese entered, smiling, his hand out. He wore an old-fashioned single-breasted suit and pointed black shoes. As they shook hands, Mr. Lee said, "She has not left for Havana, has she?"

"No," Crofts said.

"Is she pretty?" Mr. Lee said.

"Yes," Crofts said, with a smile at Herrick. "But — difficult. The snappish kind of woman. Emancipated, if you follow me."

"Oh, the suffragette type," Mr. Lee said, smiling. "I detest that type of female. It will be hard going, Mr. Crofts."

"Remember," Crofts said, "your job is simply to be converted. All you have to do is listen to her propaganda about Zen Buddhism, learn to ask a few questions such as, 'Is this stick the Buddha?' and expect a few inexplicable blows on the head — a Zen practice, I understand, supposed to instill sense."

With a broad grin, Mr. Lee said, "Or to instill nonsense. You see, I am prepared. Sense, nonsense; in Zen it's the same thing." He became sober, now. "Of course, I myself am a Communist," he said. "The only reason I'm doing this is because the Party at Havana has taken the official stand that Mercerism is dangerous and must be wiped out." He looked gloomy. "I must say, these Mercerites are fanatics."

"True," Crofts agreed. "And we must work for their extinction." He pointed to the empathy box. "Have you ever —?"

"Yes," Mr. Lee said. "It's a form of punishment. Self-imposed, no doubt for reasons of guilt. Leisure gleans such emotions from people if it is properly utilized; otherwise not."

Crofts thought, This man has no understanding of the issues at all. He's a simple materialist. Typical of a person born in a Communist family, raised in a Communist society. Everything is either black or white.

"You're mistaken," Mr. Lee said; he had picked up Crofts' thoughts.

Flushing, Crofts said, "Sorry, I forgot. No offense."

"I see in your mind," Mr. Lee said, "that you believe Wilbur Mercer, as he calls himself, may be non-T. Do you know the Party's position on this question? It was debated just a few days ago. The Party takes the stand that there are no non-T races in the solar system, that to believe remnants of once-superior races still exist is a form of morbid mysticism."

Crofts sighed. "Deciding an empirical issue by vote — deciding it on a strictly political basis. I can't understand that."

At that point, Secretary Herrick spoke up, soothing both men. "Please, let's not become sidetracked by theoretical issues on

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which we don't all agree. Let's stick to basics — the Mercerite Party and its rapid growth all over the planet."

Mr. Lee said, "You are right, of course."

III

At the Havana airfield Joan Hiashi looked around her as the other passengers walked rapidly from the ship to the entrance of the number twenty concourse.

Relatives and friends had surged cautiously out onto the field, as they always did, in defiance of field rulings. She saw among them a tall, lean young Chinese man with a smile of greeting on his face.

Walking toward him she called, "Mr. Lee?"

"Yes." He hurried toward her. "It's dinner time. Would you care to eat? I'll take you to the Hang Far Lo restaurant. They have pressed duck and bird's nest soup, all Canton-style . . . very sweet but good once in a long while."

Soon they were at the restaurant, in a red-leather and imitation teak booth. Cubans and Chinese chattered on all sides of them; the air smelled of frying pork and cigar smoke.

"You are President of the Havana Institute for Asian Studies?" she asked, just to be certain there had been no slip-ups.

"Correct. It is frowned on by the Cuban Communist Party because of the religious aspect. But many of the Chinese here on the island attend lectures or are on our mailing list. And as you know we've had many distinguished scholars from Europe and Southern Asia come and address us . . . By the way. There is a Zen parable which I do not understand. The monk who cut the kitten in half — I have studied it and thought about it, but I do not see how the Buddha could be present when cruelty was done to an animal." He hastened to add, "I'm not disputing with you. I am merely seeking information."

Joan said, "Of all the Zen parables that has caused the most difficulty. The question to ask is, Where is that kitten now?"

"That recalls the opening of the *Bhagavad-Gita*," Mr. Lee said, with a quick nod. "I recall Arjura saying,

> The bow Gandiva slips from
> my hand . . .
> Omens of evil!

What can we hope from this killing of kinsmen?"

"Correct," Joan said. "And of course you remember Krishna's answer. It is the most profound statement in all pre-Buddhistic religion on the issue of death and of action."

The waiter came for their order. He was a Cuban, in khaki and a beret.

"Try the fried won ton," Mr. Lee advised. "And the chow yuk, and of course the egg roll. You have egg roll today?" he asked the waiter.

"Si, Senor Lee." The waiter picked at his teeth with a toothpick.

Mr. Lee ordered for both of them, and the waiter departed.

"You know," Joan said, "when you've been around a telepath as much as I have, you become conscious of intensive scanning going

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on . . . I could always tell when Ray was trying to dig at something in me. You're a telepath. And you're very intensively scanning me right now."

Smiling, Mr. Lee said, "I wish I was, Miss Hiashi."

"I have nothing to hide," Joan said. "But I wonder why you are so interested in what I'm thinking. You know I'm an employee of the United States Department of State; there's nothing secret about that. Are you afraid I've come to Cuba as a spy? To study military installations? Is it something like that?" She felt depressed. "This is not a good beginning," she said. "You haven't been honest with me."

"You are a very attractive woman, Miss Hiashi," Mr. Lee said, losing none of his poise. "I was merely curious to see — shall I be blunt? Your attitude toward sex."

"You're lying," Joan said quietly.

Now the bland smile departed; he stared at her.

"Bird's nest soup, senor." The waiter had returned; he set the hot steaming bowl in the center of the table. "Tea." He laid out a teapot and two small white handleless cups. "Senorita, you want chopsticks?"

"No," she said absently.

From outside the booth came a cry of anguish. Both Joan and Mr. Lee leaped up. Mr. Lee pulled the curtain aside; the waiter was staring, too, and laughing.

At a table in the opposite corner of the restaurant sat an elderly Cuban gentleman with his hands gripping the handles of an empathy box.

"Here, too," Joan said.

"They are pests," Mr. Lee said. "Disturbing our meal."

The waiter said, "Loco." He shook his head, still chuckling.

"Yes," Joan said. "Mr. Lee, I will continue here, trying to do my job, despite what's occurred between us. I don't know why they deliberately sent a telepath to meet me — possibly it's Communist paranoid suspicions of outsiders — but in any case I have a job to do here and I mean to do it. So shall we discuss the dismembered kitten?"

"At meal time?" Mr. Lee said faintly.

"You brought it up," Joan said, and proceeded, despite the expression of acute misery on Mr. Lee's face as he sat spooning up his bird's nest soup.

At the Los Angeles studio of television station KKHF, Ray Meritan sat at his harp, waiting for his cue. *How High the Moon,* he had decided, would be his first number. He yawned, kept his eye on the control booth.

Beside him, at the blackboard, jazz commentator Glen Goldstream polished his rimless glasses with a fine linen handkerchief and said, "I think I'll tie you in with Gustav Mahler tonight."

"Who the hell is he?"

"A great late nineteenth century composer. Very romantic. Wrote long peculiar symphonies and folk-type songs. I'm thinking, however, of the rhythmic patterns in *The Drunkard in Springtime* from *Song of the Earth.* You've never heard it?"

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"Nope," Meritan said restlessly.

"Very gray-green."

Ray Meritan did not feel very gray-green tonight. His head still ached from the rock thrown at Wilbur Mercer. Meritan had tried to let go of the empathy box when he saw the rock coming, but he had not been quick enough. It had struck Mercer on the right temple, drawing blood.

"I've run into three Mercerites this evening," Glen said. "And all of them looked terrible. What happened to Mercer today?"

"How would I know?"

"You're carrying yourself the way they did today. It's your head, isn't it? I know you well enough, Ray. You'd be mixed up in anything new and odd — what do I care if you're a Mercerite? I just thought maybe you'd like a pain pill."

Brusquely, Ray Meritan said, "That would defeat the entire idea, wouldn't it? A pain pill. Here, Mr. Mercer, as you go up the hillside, how about a shot of morphine? You won't feel a thing." He rippled a few cadences on his harp, releasing his emotions.

"You're on," the producer said from the control room.

Their theme, *That's a Plenty,* swelled from the tape deck in the control room, and the number two camera facing Goldstream lit up its red light. Arms folded, Goldstream said, "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. What is jazz?"

That's what I say, Meritan thought. What is jazz? What is life? He rubbed his splintered, pain-racked forehead and wondered how he could endure the next week. Wilbur Mercer was getting close to it now. Each day it would become worse . . .

"And after a brief pause for an important message," Goldstream was saying, "we'll be back to tell you more about the world of gray-green men and women, those peculiar people, and the world of the artistry of the one and only Ray Meritan."

The tape of the commercial appeared on the TV monitor facing Meritan.

Meritan said to Goldstream, "I'll take the pain pill."

A yellow, flat, notched tablet was held out to him. "Paracodein," Goldstream said. "Highly illegal, but effective. An addictive drug . . . I'm surprised you, of all people, don't carry some."

"I used to," Ray said, as he got a dixie cup of water and swallowed the pill.

"And now you're on Mercerism."

"Now I'm—" He glanced at Goldstream; they had known each other, in their professional capacities, for years. "I'm not a Mercerite," he said, "so forget it, Glen. It's just coincidence I got a headache the night Mercer was hit on the temple by a sharp rock thrown by some moronic sadist who ought to be the one dragging his way up that hillside." He scowled at Goldstream.

"I understand," Goldstream said, "That the U. S. Department of Mental Health is on the verge of asking the Justice Department to pick up the Mercerites."

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Suddenly he swung to face camera two. A faint smile touched his face and he said smoothly, "Gray-green began about four years ago, in Pinole, California, at the now justly-famous Double Shot Club where Ray Meritan played, back in 1993 and '4. Tonight, Ray will let us hear one of his best known and liked numbers, *Once In Love With Amy*." He swung in Meritan's direction. "Ray . . . .Meritan!"

Plunk-plunk, the harp went as Ray Meritan's fingers riffled the strings.

An object lesson, he thought as he played. That's what the FBI would make me into for the teenagers, to show them what not to grow up to be. First on Paracodein, now on Mercer. Beware, kids!

Off camera, Glen Goldstream held up a sign he had scribbled.

IS MERCER A NON-TERRESTRIAL?

Underneath this, Goldstream wrote with a marking pencil:

IT'S *THAT* THEY WANT TO KNOW.

Invasion from outside there somewhere, Meritan thought to himself as he played. That's what they're afraid of. Fear of the unknown, like tiny children. That's our ruling circles: tiny, fear-ridden children playing ritualistic games with super-powerful toys.

A thought came to him from one of the network officials in the control room. *Mercer has been injured.*

At once, Ray Meritan turned his attention that way, scanned as hard as he could His fingers strummed the harp reflexively.

Government outlawing so-called empathy boxes.

He thought immediately of his own empathy box, before his TV set in the living room of his apartment.

Organization which distributes and sells the empathy boxes declared illegal, and FBI making arrests in several major cities. Other countries expected to follow.

How badly injured? he wondered. Dying?

And — what about the Mercerites who had been holding onto the handles of their empathy boxes at that moment? How were they, now? Receiving medical attention?

Should we air the news now? the network official was thinking. *Or wait until the commercial?*

Ray Meritan ceased playing his harp and said clearly into the boom microphone, "Wilbur Mercer has been injured. This is what we've all expected but it's still a major tragedy. Mercer is a saint."

Wide-eyed, Glen Goldstream gawked at him.

"I believe in Mercer," Ray Meritan said, and all across the United States his television audience heard his confession of faith. "I believe his suffering and injury and death have meaning for each of us."

It was done; he had gone on record. And it hadn't even taken much courage.

"Pray for Wilbur Mercer," he said and resumed playing his gray-green style of harp.

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You fool, Glen Goldstream was thinking. Giving yourself away! You'll be in jail within a week. Your career is ruined!

Plunk-plunk, Ray played on his harp, and smiled humorlessly at Glen.

IV

Mr. Lee said, "Do you know the story of the Zen monk, who was playing hide and go seek with the children? Was it Basho who tells this? The monk hid in an outhouse and the children did not think of looking there, and so they forgot him. He was a very simple man. Next day—"

"I admit that Zen is a form of stupidity," Joan Hiashi said. "It extols the virtues of being simple and gullible. And remember, the original meaning of 'gullible' is one who is easily gulled, easily cheated." She sipped a little of her tea and found it now cold.

"Then you are a true practitioner of Zen," Mr. Lee said. "Because you have been gulled." He reached inside his coat and brought out a pistol, which he pointed at Joan. "You're under arrest."

"By the Cuban Government?" she managed to say.

"By the United States Government," Mr. Lee said. "I have read your mind and I learn that you know that Ray Meritan is a prominent Mercerite and you yourself are attracted to Mercerism."

"But I'm not!"

Unconsciously you are attracted. You are about to switch over. I can pick up those thoughts, even if you

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deny them to yourself. We are going back to the United States, you and I, and there we will find Mr. Ray Meritan and he will lead us to Wilbur Mercer; it is as simple as that."

"And this is why I was sent to Cuba?"

"I am a member of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party," Mr. Lee said. "And the sole telepath on that committee. We have voted to work in cooperation with the United States Department of State during this current Mercer crisis. Our Plane, Miss Hiashi, leaves for Washington, D.C. in half an hour; let us get down to the airport at once."

Joan Hiashi looked helplessly about the restaurant. Other people eating, the waiters . . . nobody paid any attention. She rose to her feet as a waiter passed with a heavily-loaded tray. "This man," she said, pointing to Mr. Lee, "is kidnapping me. Help me, please."

The waiter glanced at Mr. Lee, saw who it was, smiled at Joan and shrugged. "Mr. Lee, he is an important man," the waiter said, and went on with his tray.

"What he says is true," Mr Lee said to her.

Joan ran from the booth and across the restaurant. "Help me," she said to the elderly Cuban Mercerite who sat with his empathy box before him. "I'm a Mercerite. They're arresting me."

The lined old face lifted; the man scrutinized her.

"Help me," she said.

"Praise Mercer," the old man said.

You can't help me, she realized. She turned back to Mr. Lee, who had followed after her, still holding the pistol pointed at her. "This old man is not going to do a thing," Mr. Lee said. "Not even get to his feet."

She sagged. "All right. I know."

The television set in the corner suddenly ceased its yammering of day-time trash; the image of a woman's face and bottle of cleanser abruptly disappeared and there was only blackness. Then, in Spanish, a news announcer began to speak.

"Hurt," Mr. Lee said, listening. "But Mercer is not dead. How do you feel, Miss Hiashi, as a Mercerite? Does this affect you? Oh, but that's right. One must take hold of the handles first, for it to reach you. It must be a voluntary act."

Joan picked up the elderly Cuban's empathy box, held it for a moment, and then seized the handles. Mr. Lee stared at her in surprise; he moved toward her, reaching for the box . . .

It was not pain that she felt. Is this how it is? she wondered as she saw around her, the restaurant dim and fade. Maybe Wilbur Mercer is unconscious; that must be it. I'm escaping from you, she thought to Mr. Lee. You can't — or at least you won't — follow me where I've gone: into the tomb world of Wilbur Mercer, who is dying somewhere on a barren plain, surrounded by his enemies. Now I'm with him. And it is an escape from something worse. From you. And you're never going to be able to get me back.

She saw, around her, a desolate

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expanse. The air smelled of harsh blossoms; this was the desert, and there was no rain.

A man stood before her, a sorrowful light in his gray, pain-drenched eyes. "I am your friend," he said, "but you must go on as if I did not exist. Can you understand that?" He spread empty hands.

"No," she said, "I can't understand that."

"How can I save you," the man said, "if I can't save myself?" He smiled. "Don't you see? *There is no salvation.*"

"Then what's it all for?" she asked.

"To show you," Wilbur Mercer said, "that you aren't alone. I am here with you and always will be. Go back and face them. And tell them that."

She released the handles.

Mr. Lee, holding his gun to her, said, "Well?"

"Let's go," she said. "Back to the United States. Turn me over to the FBI. It doesn't matter."

"What did you see?" Mr. Lee said, with curiosity.

"I won't tell you."

"But I can learn it anyhow. From your mind.' He was probing, now, listening with his head cocked on one side. The corners of his mouth turned down as if he was pouting.

"I don't call that much," he said. "Mercer looks you in the face and says he can't do anything for you — is this the man you'd lay down your life for, you and the others? You're ill."

"In the society of the insane," Joan said, "the sick are well."

"What nonsense!" Mr. Lee said.

To Bogart Crofts, Mr. Lee said, "It was interesting. She became a Mercerite directly in front of me. The latency transforming itself into actuality . . . it proved I was correct in what I previously read in her mind."

"We'll have Meritan picked up any time now," Crofts said to his superior, Secretary Herrick. "He left the television studio in Los Angeles, where he got news of Mercer's severe injury. After that, no one seems to know what he did. He did *not* return to his apartment. The local police picked up his empathy box, and he was beyond a doubt not on the premises."

"Where is Joan Hiashi?" Crofts asked.

"Being held now in New York," Mr. Lee said.

"On what charge?" Crofts asked Secretary Herrick.

"Political agitation inimical to the safety of the United States."

Smiling, Mr. Lee said, "And arrested by a Communist official in Cuba. It is a Zen paradox which no doubt fails to delight Miss Hiashi."

Meanwhile, Bogart Crofts reflected, empathy boxes were being collected in huge quantities. Soon their destruction would begin. Within forty-eight hours most of the empathy boxes in the United States would no longer exist, including the one here in his office.

It still rested on his desk, untouched. It was he who originally had asked that it be brought in, and in all this time he had kept his hands off it, had never yielded. Now he walked over to it.

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"What would happen," he asked Mr. Lee, "if I took hold of these two handles? There's no television set here. I have no idea what Wilbur Mercer is doing right now; in fact for all that I know, now he's finally dead."

Mr. Lee said, "If you grip the handles, sir, you will enter a—I hesitate to use the word but it seems to apply. A mystical communion. With Mr. Mercer, wherever he is; you will share his suffering, as you know, but that is not all. You will also participate in his—" Mr. Lee reflected. "'World-view' is not the correct term. Ideology? No."

Secretary Herrick suggested, "What about *trance-state*?"

"Perhaps that is it," Mr. Lee said, frowning. "No, that is not it either. No word will do, and that is the entire point. It cannot be described—it must be experienced."

"I'll try," Crofts decided.

"No," Mr. Lee said. "Not if you are following my advice. I would warn you away from it. I saw Miss Hiashi do it, and I saw the change in her. Would you have tried Paracodein when it was popular with rootless cosmopolite masses?" He sounded angry.

"I have tried Paracodein," Crofts said. "It did absolutely nothing for me."

"What do you want done, Boge?" Secretary Herrick asked him.

Shrugging, Bogart Crofts said, "I mean I could see no reason for anyone liking it, wanting to become addicted to it." And at last he took hold of the two handles of the empathy box.

V

Walking slowly in the rain, Ray Meritan said to himself. They got my empathy box and if I go back to the apartment they'll get me.

His telepathic talent had saved him. As he entered the building he had picked up the thoughts of the gang of city police.

It was now past midnight. The trouble is I'm too well-known, he realized, from my damned TV show. No matter where I go I'll be recognized.

At least anywhere on Earth.

Where is Wilbur Mercer? he asked himself. In this solar system or somewhere beyond it, under a different sun entirely? Maybe we'll never know. Or at least *I'll* never know.

But did it matter? Wilbur Mercer was somewhere; that was all that was important. And there was always a way to reach him. The empathy box was always there—or at least had been, until the police raids. And Meritan had a feeling that the distribution company which had supplied the empathy boxes, and which led a shadowy existence anyhow, would find a way around the police. If he was right about them—

Ahead in the rainy darkness he saw the red lights of a bar. He turned and entered it.

To the bartender he said, "Look, do you have an empathy box? I'll pay you one hundred dollars for the use of it."

The bartender, a big burly man with hairy arms, said, "Naw, I don't

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have nuthin like that. Go on."

The people at the bar watched, and one of them said, "Those are illegal now."

"Hey, it's Ray Meritan," another said. "The jazz man."

Another man said lazily, "Play some gray-green jazz for us, jazz man." He sipped at his mug of beer.

Meritan started out of the bar.

"Wait," the bartender said. "Hold on, buddy. Go to this address." He wrote on a match folder, then held it out to Meritan.

"How much do I owe you?" Meritan said.

"Oh, five dollars ought to do it."

Meritan paid and left the bar, the match folder in his pocket. It's probably the address of the local police station, he said to himself. But I'll give it a try anyhow.

If I could get to an empathy box one more time—

The address which the bartender had given him was an old-decaying wooden building in downtown Los Angeles. He rapped on the door and stood waiting.

The door opened. A middle-aged heavy woman in bathrobe and furry slippers peeped out at him. "I'm not the police," he said. "I'm a Mercerite. Can I use your empathy box?"

The door gradually opened; the woman scrutinized him and evidently believed him, although she said nothing.

"Sorry to bother you so late," he apologized.

"What happened to you, mister?" the woman said. "You look bad."

"It's Wilbur Mercer," Ray said. "He's hurt."

"Turn it on," the woman said, leading him with shuffling into a dark, cold parlor where a parrot slept in a huge, bent, brass-wire cage. There, on an old-fashioned radio cabinet, he saw the empathy box. He felt relief creep over him at the sight of it.

"Don't be shy," the woman said.

"Thanks," he said, and took hold of the handles.

A voice said in his ear, "We'll use the girl. She'll lead us to Meritan. I was right to hire her in the first place."

Ray Meritan did not recognize the voice. It was not that of Wilbur Mercer. But even so, bewildered, he held tightly onto the handles, listening; he remained frozen there, hands extended, clutching.

"The non-T force has appealed to the most credulous segment of our community, but this segment — I firmly believe — is being manipulated by a cynical minority of opportunists at the top, such as Meritan. They're cashing in on this Wilbur Mercer craze for their own pocketbooks." The voice, self-assured, droned on.

Ray Meritan felt fear as he heard it. For this was someone on the other side, he realized. Somehow he had gotten into empathic contact with him, and not with Wilbur Mercer.

Or had Mercer done this deliberately, arranged this? He listened on, and now he heard:

"...have to get the Hiashi girl out of New York and back here, where we can quiz her further." The voice added, "As I told Herrick . . ."

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Herrick, the Secretary of State. This was someone in the State Department thinking, Meritan realized, thinking about Joan. Perhaps this was the official at State who had hired her.

Then she wasn't in Cuba. She was in New York. What had gone wrong? The whole implication was that State had merely made use of Joan to get at him.

He released the handles and the voice faded from his presence.

"Did you find him?" the middle-aged woman asked.

"Y-yes," Meritan said, disconcerted, trying to orient himself in the unfamiliar room.

"How is he? Is he well?"

"I — don't know right now," Meritan answered, truthfully. He thought, I must go to New York. And try to help Joan. She's in this because of me; I have no choice. Even if they catch me because of it . . . how can I desert her?

Bogart Crofts said, "I didn't get Mercer."

He walked away from the empathy box, then turned to glare at it, balefully. "I got Meritan. But I don't know where he is. At the moment I took hold of the handles of this box, Meritan took hold somewhere else. We were connected and now he knows everything I know. And we know everything he knows, which isn't much." Dazed he turned to Secretary Herrick. "He doesn't know any more about Wilbur Mercer than we do; he was trying to reach him. He definitely is *not* Mercer." Crofts was silent then.

"There's more," Herrick said, turning to Mr. Lee. "What else did he get from Meritan, Mr. Lee?"

"Meritan is coming to New York to try to find Joan Hiashi," Mr. Lee said, obligingly reading Crofts' mind. "He got that from Mr. Meritan during the moment their minds were fused."

"We'll prepare to receive Mr. Meritan," Secretary Herrick said, with a grimace.

"Did I experience what you telepaths engage in all the time?" Crofts asked Mr. Lee.

"Only when one of us comes close to another telepath," Mr. Lee said "It can be unpleasant. We avoid it, because if the two minds are thoroughly dissimilar and hence clash, it is psychologically harmful. I would assume you and Mr. Meritan clashed."

Crofts said, "Listen, how can we continue with this? I know now that Meritan is innocent. He doesn't know a damn thing about Mercer or the organization that distributes these boxes except its name."

There was momentary silence.

"But he is one of the few celebrities who has joined the Mercerites," Secretary Herrick pointed out. He handed a teletype dispatch to Crofts. "And he has done it openly. If you'll take the trouble to read this —"

"I know he affirmed his loyalty to Mercer on this evening's TV program," Crofts said, trembling.

"When you're dealing with a non-T force originating from another solar system entirely," Secretary Herrick said, "you must move with

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care. We will still try to take Meritan, and definitely through Miss Hiashi. We'll release her from jail and have her followed. When Meritan makes contact with her —"

To Crofts, Mr. Lee said, "Don't say what you intend, Mr. Crofts. It will permanently damage your career."

Crofts said, "Herrick, this is wrong. Meritan is innocent and so is Joan Hiashi. If you try to trap Meritan I'll resign from State."

"Write out your resignation and hand it to me," Secretary Herrick said. His face was dark.

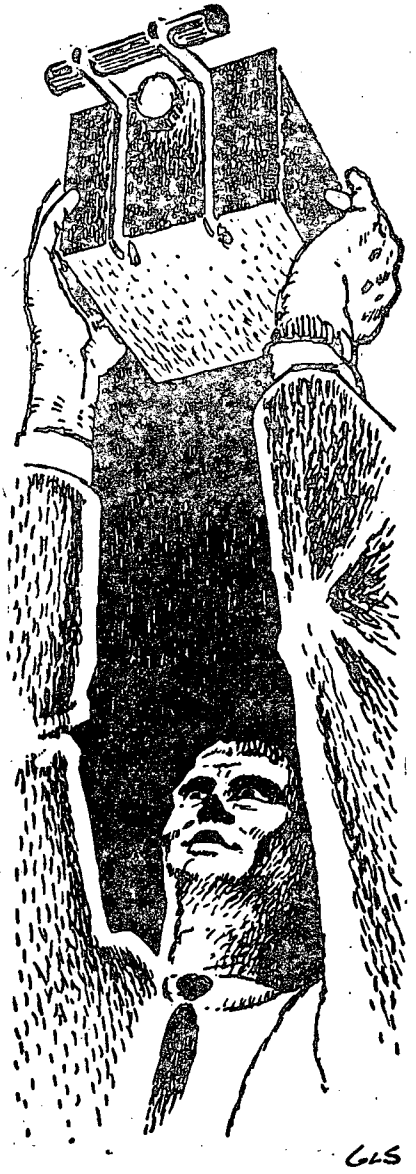
"This is unfortunate," Mr. Lee said. "I would guess that your contact with Mr. Meritan warped your judgment, Mr. Crofts. He has influenced you malignly; shake it off, for the sake of your long career and country, not to mention your family."

"What we're doing is wrong," Crofts repeated.

Secretly Herrick, stared at him angrily. "No wonder those empathy boxes have done harm! Now I've seen it with my own eyes. I wouldn't turn back on any condition now."

He picked up the empathy box which Crofts had used. Lifting it high he dropped it to the floor. The box cracked open and then settled in a heap of irregular surfaces. "Don't consider that a childish act," he said. "I want any contact between us and Meritan broken. It can only be harmful."

"If we capture him," Crofts said, "he may continue to exert influence



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over us." He amended his statement: "Or rather , over me."

"Be that as it may, I intend to continue," Secretary Herrick said. "And please present your resignation. Mr. Crofts I intend to act on that matter as well." He looked grim and determined.

Mr. Lee said, "Secretary, I can read Mr. Crofts' mind and I see that he is stunned at this moment. He is the innocent victim of a situation, arranged perhaps by Wilbur Mercer to spread confusion among us. And if you accept Mr. Crofts' resignation, Mercer will have succeeded."

"It doesn't matter whether he accepts it or not," Crofts said. "Because in any case I'm resigning."

Sighing, Mr. Lee said, "The empathy box made you suddenly into an involuntary telepath and it was just too much." He patted Mr. Crofts on the shoulder. "Telepathic power and empathy are two versions of the same thing. Should be called 'telepathic box.' Amazing, those non-T individuals; they can build what we can only evolve."

"Since you can read my mind," Crofts said to him, "you know what I'm planning to do. I have no doubt you'll tell Secretary Herrick."

Grinning blandly, Mr. Lee said, "The Secretary and I are cooperating in the interest of world peace. We both have our instructions." To Herrick he said, "This man is so upset that he now actually considers switching over. Joining the Mercerites before all the boxes are destroyed. He *liked* being an involuntary telepath."

"If you switch," Herrick said, "you'll be arrested. I promise it."

Crofts said nothing.

"He has not changed his mind," Mr. Lee said urbanely, nodding to both men, apparently amused by the situation.

But underneath, Mr. Lee was thinking, A brilliant bold type of stroke by the thing that calls itself Wilbur Mercer, this hooking up of Crofts with Meritan direct. It undoubtedly foresaw that Crofts the strong emanations from the movement's core. The next step is that Crofts will again consult an empathy box — if he can find one —and this time Mercer itself will address him personally. Address its new disciple.

They have gained a man, Mr. Lee realized. They are ahead.

But ultimately we will win. Because ultimately we will manage to destroy all the empathy boxes, and without them Wilbur Mercer can do nothing. This is the only way he has — or *it* has — of reaching and controlling people, as it has done here with unfortunate Mr. Crofts. *Without the empathy boxes the movement is helpless.*

VI

At the UWA desk, at Rocky Field in New York City, Joan Hiashi said to the uniformed clerk, "I want to buy a one-way ticket to Los Angeles on the next flight. Jet or rocket; it doesn't matter. I just want to get there."

"First class or tourist?" the clerk asked.

"Aw, hell," Joan said wearily,

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just sell me a ticket. Any kind of a ticket." She opened her purse.

As she started to pay for the ticket a hand stopped hers. She turned—and there stood Ray Meritan, his face twisting with relief.

"What a place to try to pick up your thoughts," he said. "Come on, let's go where it's quiet. You have ten minutes before your flight."

They hurried together through the building until they came to a deserted ramp. There they stopped, and Joan said, "Listen, Ray I know it's a trap for you. That's why they let me out. But where else can I go except to you?"

Ray said, "Don't worry about it. They were bound to pick me up sooner or later. I'm sure they know I left California and came here." He glanced around. "No FBI agents near us yet. At least I don't pick up anything suggesting it." He lit a cigarette.

"I don't have any reason to go back to L. A.," Joan said, "now that you're here. I might as well cancel my flight."

"You know they're picking up and destroying all the empathy boxes they can," Ray said.

"No," she said. "I didn't know, I was just released half an hour ago. That's dreadful. They really mean business."

Ray laughed. "Let's say they're really frightened." He put his arm around her and kissed her. "I tell you what we'll do. We'll try to sneak out of this place, go to the lower East Side and rent a little cold-water walk-up. We'll hide out find an empathy box they missed." But, he thought, it's unlikely; they probably have them all by now. There weren't that many to start with.

"Anything you say," Joan said drably.

"Do you love me?" he asked her. "I can read your mind; you do." And then he said quietly, "I can also read the mind of a Mr. Lewis Scanlan, an FBI man who's now at the UWA desk. What name did you give?"

"Mrs. George McIsaacs," Joan said. "I think." She examined her ticket and envelope. "Yes, that's right."

But Scanlan is asking if a Japanese woman has been at the desk in the last fifteen minutes," Ray said. "And the clerk remembers you. So—" He took hold of Joan's arm. "We better get started."

They hurried down the deserted ramp, passed through an electric-eye operated door and came out in a baggage lobby. Everyone there was far too busy locating their baggage to pay any attention as Ray Meritan and Joan threaded their way to the street door and, a moment later, stepped out onto the chill gray sidewalk where cabs had parked in a long double row. Joan started to hail a cab...

"Wait," Ray said, pulling her back. "I'm getting a jumble of thoughts. One of the cab drivers is an FBI man but I can't tell which." He stood uncertainly, not knowing what to do.

"We can't get away, can we?" Joan said.

"It's going to be hard." To himself he thought, More like impossi-

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ble; you're right. He experienced the girl's confused, frightened thoughts, her anxiety about him, that she had made it possible for them to locate and capture him, her fierce desire not to return to jail, her pervasive bitterness at having been betrayed by Mr. Lee, the Chinese Communist bigshot who had met her in Cuba.

"What a life," Joan said, standing close to him.

And still he did not know which cab to take. One precious second after another escaped as he stood there. "Listen," he said to Joan, "maybe we should separate."

"No," she said clinging to him. "I can't stand to do it alone any more. Please."

A bewhiskered peddler walked up to them with a tray suspended by a cord which ran about his neck. "Hi, folks," he mumbled.

"Not now," Joan said to him.

"Free sample of breakfast cereal," the peddler said. "No cost. Just take a box, miss. You mister. Take one." He extended the tray of small, gaily colored cartons toward Ray.

Strange, Ray thought. I'm not picking up anything from this man's mind. He stared at the peddler, saw — or thought he saw — a peculiar insubstantiality to the man. A diffused quality.

Ray took one of the samples of breakfast cereal.

"Merry Meal, it's called," the peddler said. "A new product they're introducing to the public. There's a free coupon inside. Entitles you to —"

"Okay," Ray said, sticking the box in his pocket. He took hold of Joan and led her along the line of cabs. He chose one at random and opened the rear door. "Get in," he said urgently to her.

"I took a sample of Merry Meal, too," she said with a wan smile as he seated himself beside her. The cab started up, left the line and pulled past the entrance of the airfield terminal. "Ray, there was something strange about that salesman. It was as if he wasn't actually there, as if he was nothing more than — a picture."

As the cab drove down the auto ramp, away from the terminal, another cab left the line and followed after them. Twisting, Ray saw riding in the back of it two well-fed men in dark business suits. FBI men, he said to himself.

Joan said, "Didn't that cereal salesman remind you of anyone?"

"Who?"

"A little of Wilbur Mercer. But I haven't seen him enough to —"

Ray grabbed the cereal box from her hand, tore the cardboard top from it. Poking up from the dry cereal he saw the corner of the coupon the peddler had spoken about; he lifted out the coupon, held it up and studied it. The coupon said in large clear printing:

HOW TO ASSEMBLE AN EMPATHY BOX FROM ORDINARY HOUSEHOLD OBJECTS

"It was them" he said to Joan. He put the coupon carefully away

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in his pocket, then he changed his mind. Folding it up, he tucked it in the cuff of his trousers. Where the FBI possibly wouldn't find it.

Behind them, the other cab came closer, and now he picked up the thoughts of the two men. They were FBI agents; he had been right. He settled back against the seat.

There was nothing to do but wait.

Joan said, "Could I have the other coupon?"

"Sorry." He got out the other cereal package. She opened it, found the coupon inside and, after a pause, folded it and hid it in the hem of her skirt.

"I wonder how many there are of those so-called peddlers," Ray said musingly. "I'd be interested to know how many free samples of Merry Meal they're going to manage to give away before they're caught."

The first ordinary household object needed was a common radio set; he had noticed that. The second, the filament from a five-year lightbulb. And next — he'd have to look again, but now was not the time. The other cab had drawn abreast with theirs.

Later. And if the authorities found the coupon in the cuff of his trousers, *they*, he knew, would somehow manage to bring him another.

He put his arm around Joan. "I think we'll be all right."

The other cab, now, was nosing theirs to the curb and the two FBI men were waving in a menacing, official manner to the driver to stop.

"Shall I stop?" the driver said tensely to Ray.

"Sure," he said. And, taking a deep breath, prepared himself.

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WE FROM ARCTURUS

BY CHRISTOPHER ANVIL

The planet was a pushover. Its people were helpless. But what was it that had ruined two invasion teams?

Boglis Kamm stood at the edge of the woods and squinted at the factories, the whizzing cars and the shiny aircraft slanting down toward the rich valley spread out before him. Unconsciously, he licked his lips.

"There are so many loose ends and unprotected flanks," he said, "You hardly know where to start to eat them up."

Slint, Kamm's companion in Test Infiltration #6, sank the hooks of the Sirian camouflage cloth into the sod around the little Arcturan-made personnel-spacer.

"It looks easy," said Slint. "But what happened to Test Infiltrations #1, #2, #3, 4 and 5? They came down around here, too, you know. All in the last ninety days. And not a peep from any of them."

Kamm scowled, and cast around through various telepathic communications channels, "Nothing but static," he said. "And we've seen their transport and building techniques. All physical."

Slint picked up a crude shovel —

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made by his own race: with a ragged edge, no bend for leverage where the blade joined the handle, the blade braced by a pair of criss-crossed mending plates and the handle wrapped in a yard of tape at a weak point. Slint looked at the shovel with distaste, then shoved it under the camouflage cloth and straightened up.

"Let's hope this planet has a few mechanized hand tools. Every time we hit a rock too big to teleport, we end up working on it with a crowbar and that miserable shovel."

Kamm nodded. "The thing takes up altogether too much room. It's bad enough, having to convert to Arcturan form to use the spacer. But to have to ooze around that shovel and the damned crowbar every time you want to move is just too much."

A low rumble interrupted their conversation. Kamm glanced apprehensively at the big gray clouds gliding overhead.

Slint said, "How do I look? Okay for a native?"

Kamm critically studied Slint's regular human features, the hang of his arms and set of his head on his neck, the action of arms and legs as he walked, his quiet gray suit, white shirt and blue tie. He checked to be sure Slint had four fingers and one thumb on each hand.

"Look satisfactory."

"Okay. I'll check you."

Kamm strode briskly across the clearing and back again, till he was again looking down the hill.

Slint nodded. "Good. Matches the 'color TV' and what we've been able to pick up telepathically."

"Fine. A few more details and we can go."

Kamm reached into a side pocket, pulled out his Aldeberanian protoplasm-coagulator, checked it carefully and slid it back in his pocket.

Slint glanced at the sky, and hesitated. "Should we just go now, while there's time? Or do we have to — "

"Hmm," Kamm squinted at a formidable black cloud sliding across the sky in their direction. "But what if we get back and they question us on procedure?"

Slint groaned. "I'll get it out, and we can go through it out here. When it lets fly full-blast in that little constricted cabin — "

There was a heavy rumble of thunder.

Kamm nodded. "Okay. Nobody's around to overhear it, and they couldn't understand it anyway. Maybe the thunder will even drown it out for us."

"No such luck," growled Slint. He vanished as he teleported himself into the personnel spacer, then reappeared a moment later holding a small recorder of Centauran make, which he hung on a dead lower branch of a sizeable pine tree about twenty feet back from the edge of the clearing. He threw a switch.

"*Citizens*!" roared a voice from the recorder box, speaking their native tongue.

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The Sirian camouflage cloth over the Arcturan spacer had now adapted itself to its surroundings, and looked like a gentle mossy swell of ground.

"*Soldiers!*" shouted the recorder.

There was a rumble of thunder.

Slint growled. "I hope it gets it over with quick."

"It never does," said Kamm.

"*Conquerors!*" screamed the box.

"Ho-hum,' said Kamm.

"You go forth," bellowed the recorder, "to glory and to triumph! To rend another glowing jewel from the violet orb of space! To place it in the diadem of the Only True Race! Victory and glory are yours! Yours the triumph! Yours the splendor! Of the greatest race of conquerors ever to span the stars!"

"If," murmured Slint, "your gravitor doesn't conk out."

"Or your heat-control," said Kamm.

A heavy crash of thunder providentially drowned out the next part. When they could hear again, the recorder had finished off its opening generalities and got down to details.

"That," it intoned, "which distinguishes Us from all other known life-forms is Our adaptability.

"Anyone can strut and glory in mere physical force.

"Hundreds of races take pride in puny intellect.

"Scores boast the power of telepathic and clairvoyant communications, the telekinetic ability to exert force at a distance.

"Only we, of all known races, can also take the form, and reproduce the structure, of all the rest, and thus conquer silently, efficiently, destroying even the telepathic by our temporary assumption of identity with them!

"Such supernal capacity is not bought without a price.

"Magnificent protoplasm-condition must be rigidly maintained. Clean living is essential. Healthful conditions must be upheld or our unparalleled protoplasmic control is impaired. This is the only requirement. This is all. There is nothing more. But it is essential.

"You, as you go forth upon your mission, can, must and *will* maintain yourselves uncontaminated, for the glory of conquest!

"For the triumph of the race!

"For the —"

There was a blinding flash of light, and a crack of thunder that made the earth shake. Rain poured down, drenching them in an instant.

Slint ran to get the recorder, now blaring martial music through the downpour. Kamm and Slint teleported themselves into the little spacer, where they fit as uncomfortably as two sardines into a pea-pod. From overhead, the rain drummed on the camoflage cloth and gurgled as it ran down under the cloth and filled up the spaces between the spacer and the dirt it sat in. The recorder, after an instant of impressive silence, let go with a final crashing crescendo that left them all but deaf.

When they had the recorder jammed into its cubicle, Slint said angrily, "Now what do we do? Re-

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convert to Arcturan form so we can stand it in this shoebox?"

Kamm twisted to get one of the spiny control-handles the Arcturans were so fond of out of his ribs. "Well, we can't see through that downpour. And I don't care to wind up inside a steam boiler, or halfway through a wall. So teleportation's out."

"Personnel Control and their fool idea that no one can go on a Test Infiltration if he's got good clairvoyance!"

Kamm experimentally tried to see mentally and got his usual fuzzy, vague, near-sighted image.

"Well," he said, "I'm certainly not going to trust myself to *that*."

"I suppose," growled Slint, "that they're afraid we'll only look from a distance, instead of really test-infiltrating, and some slick psi race might fool us.

"Lower creatures are sometimes superior in lower skills," said Kamm, trying to console himself for his miserable clairvoyance. "But," he added, changing the subject, "we're still stuck here."

"Tell you what," said Slint. "You remember those six-legged, web-footed mud-divers on Grinnel II? *They* wouldn't have any trouble with this weather."

"Good idea," said Kamm. "And we can make up a couple of waterproof suitcases to carry the clothes in. I saw on a late-night TV movie where you can get into a 'hotel' easier with a suitcase."

Two hours later, a pair of monsters eased out from under the camouflage cloth and, walking on five legs with another leg apiece clutching a suitcase, ambled out of the forest and down the hill.

Part way down the hill was a highway, and here a problem manifested itself.

"Look at that," growled Kamm, "there are *still* a lot of cars on that road, despite the rain."

"And heaven help us if they see us."

Kamm considered various details of information picked up from late shows on TV. This planet, being subjected to regular eruptions of giant apes, huge ants and spiders, enormous sea monsters and invaders from other planets of the local solar system, was no doubt all set up to squash a pair of web-footed mud-divers in nothing flat.

"On the other hand," he said, exasperated. "even though we can now *see* across this road, we can't teleport across it."

"Burn out the nervous system," agreed Slint.

"Hmm." Kamm looked around. "Well, we certainly can't risk being seen. Maybe we can detour *around* this road. The forest seems to run along the hill for quite a ways, to give us cover."

"Worth a try."

Fifteen or twenty minutes of this disclosed another problem.

While the mud-diver's body was not at all disturbed by the downpour, the creature's feet were unaccustomed to the comparatively hard soil and its muscles and bones were designed for a planet with lighter gravity.

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"Phew," said Kamm, shifting the suitcase from one limb to another. "I'm going to have to strengthen the creature's muscles."

"That will mean larger attachments at the bones, and a better blood-supply."

"Which will mean a larger heart —"

"And better lungs —"

"And we've already turned ourselves inside out, just fitting the creatures to speak simple words."

Slint groaned. "Let's sit down a minute."

"How? Where do you put all the legs, and these webbed claws?"

"I forgot. The things don't sit down to rest. They go out into deep water and float."

Kam strained the mud-diver's vocabulary with some well-chosen comments.

The upshot was that half an hour later he and Slint came out from under a large, big-leaved tree, walking erect, looking human and also wet and mad, and carrying the suitcases in their left hands.

"Possibly," snarled Kamm, "the other five infiltration teams drowned to death."

"It might be," said Slint. "It certainly is a sorry thing that with all our superior abilities we can't even keep from getting wet."

"That's a thought." Kamm tried teleporting the rain drops as they fell, but they poured down so thick and fast that he was worn-out and frazzled in no time.

A particularly heavy crash was followed by a downpour like a waterfall.

They squished down the hill toward the road. The rain momentarily faded to a steady shower.

"Why," said Slint, "didn't we run off some of these 'umbrellas' on the fabricator You know. Like what we saw on the TV. What they carry around in the London fog to hide under when they stop people on the late-night movies."

"We didn't run off any umbrellas because we were too busy following *your* idea of making the trip as mud-divers."

They trudged in a strained silence to the highway.

At the highway, the first five cars gave them a wide berth, the sixth ran through a nearby puddle and soaked them again to the skin, the next three in quick succession accelerated past as if afraid they might be attacked, and then a car braked to a stop and backed up. The door opened, disclosing a beat-up interior, the rubber floor mat in bits and pieces, and the stuffing showing through worn spots in the seat cushions.

"Hop in, boys," said the driver jovially. You're wet, but that won't hurt this jalopy."

"Thanks," said Kamm, climbing in.

"Thanks a lot," said Slint.

The driver reached over and slammed the door. "I've walked many a mile, rain and shine, and I know what it's like. Have a smoke?"

He took some whitish tubes in a little paper box and held it out to them. Having seen this on TV, they knew what was expected, and each

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took one of the little cylindrically shaped things and stuck it in his mouth.

Kamm murmured telepathically, I think our luck has changed for the better. This native is friendly. We should be able to get some information.

Yes, but more immediately, we have to "light" these what-do-you-call-thems. How do we do that?

You notice the driver just pushed a litle plug in the car's control board. When that pops out, we just hold it to the "cigarette" and smoke will come out. I saw it in a late movie.

"Yes *sir,*" said the driver amiably, "there's nothing like a car — so long as it runs. Yours is broke down, I suppose."

"Yes. Yes, that's the trouble."

They sat draining on the seat in a friendly silence.

Slint's thought came to Kamm. *I fail to see why the other five teams failed to report. Look how friendly and unsuspecting this specimen is.*

They certainly seem like natural victims, thought Kamm.

The amicable driver cleared his throat. "Don't happen to know what's wrong with your car?"

Slint spoke up, his voice faintly mimicking that of a stranded farmer they'd both seen on a TV show.

"Rod jumped out through the side of the block."

The driver grunted. "Too bad."

Slint thought, *Whatever that may be.*

I wondered myself, thought Kamm.

They certainly are unsuspicious. I'll see what I can find out. Aloud, Slint said. "Is that serious?"

The driver boggled, and the car almost ran off the road. *"Is it serious?"*

"Just thought I'd ask," murmured Slint, to pass the subject off. He tried to look nonchalant.

The driver took a fresh grip on the wheel and cast a sidewise glance at Slint and Kamm.

The little plug popped partway out, and Slint took it out and held the handle of the plug to the tip of his cigarette. He waited patiently for some smoke.

Kamm, thrown off-balance by the powerful aura of suspicion suddenly emanating from the driver, forgot himself and spoke out loud. "No, no. The other end."

Slint took the cigarette out of his mouth, turned it around, and tried the other end. "What's the difference?"

The driver reached under the seat, and came up with a short length of one-inch pipe, which he slipped out of sight under his coat, hoping he hadn't been seen.

No, no, Kamm was saying telepathically. *The plug. The other end of the plug. Turn it around. Careful!*

Slint worked the plug and cigarette clumsily, got smoke coming out of the cigarette, and then for some reason immediately went into a coughing fit.

The driver's thought came over fuzzily, obviously impelled by some powerful emotion:

Couple of nuts escaped from the State Hospital. Have to unload them first chance I get.

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Kamm had the bare words of the thought, but couldn't make out the background ideas and shadings. Seeking to calm the driver, he put the plug back in its hole, pushed it in knowledgeably, and remarked in friendly tone, "if you can get us to a — er — " A desperate search through remembered television shows failed to turn up the exact word he was looking for, so he borrowed a couple of words, that he was sure meant the same thing, from a commercial. "Automotive specialist," he concluded.

"Sure," said the driver, his left hand under his coat.

The plug popped out, and Kamm, striving to act like a natural Earthman, casually pulled the plug out, stuck it against the cigarette, sucked, blew, sucked, blew, sucked —

Glowing spots swam before his eyes. His stomach rolled over, throat constricted, and tears ran down his cheeks. Hot volcanic gases seemed to circulate through his insides. The fumes traveled around his lungs, and he had a sensation like a sledgehammer smashing him between the eyes.

The car swerved to the side.

The driver leaned across and opened the door. His voice, filled with false cheer, boomed out. "Here we are, boys. Service station. They'll take care of your car here."

Kamm and Slint reeled out of the car. A door slammed, brakes screeched momentarily, then the whine of the engine dwindled and faded into the distance.

Kamm looked through a soaking drizzle at a large rough bench, a trash can, and a sign, "Parking Area."

There was a crash of thunder, a blast of cold wind, and the rain picked up again.

Slint groaned. "This is no service station."

"There's got to be one along the road somewhere."

"I just want to lie down and —"

"Walk," said Kamm dizzily. "If we lay down in this rain, these human-type bodies will get a 'chill,' there'll be 'congestion' —" he remembered a TV ad — "Maybe even "sinus!' "

"All right," said Slint wearily "I'll walk."

They staggered out onto the road, and the cars passed by monotonously.

Thirty-five minutes later, they trudged into a service station. The big door of the shop was slid up, and they went in.

An attendant apeared from somewhere, cigarette dangling from lower lip, and stared at them. He disappeared into a kind of office. There was a sound of gurgling liquid, and he returned carrying two paper cups.

"Cold medicine." He grinned. "The best. You guys look like you need it. Car broke down?""

"Thanks," said Kamm, taking the cup of brownish liquid.

Slint also murmured his thanks, and added, "Yeah, our car's broke down." He added warily, "We don't know what's wrong with it."

They gulped the cold medicine, aware from the TV ads that a human body with a cold wasn't pleasant.

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The cold medicine slid down their throats, and momentarily coiled in their stomachs.

There was the clang of a bell.

"Customer," said the attendant. "Be right back." He ran out.

The cold medicine seemed to flash into hot vaporous fumes surrounding them.

The top of Kamm's head felt as if it rose up about three inches, to let steam blow out his ears.

"Strange sensation," came Slint's voice, from somewhere.

The garage was traveling in slow circles around them as the attendant came back in.

"You're in luck. My partner was out to eat, but he just got back. Tell you what. Go in that washroom, if you want, and wring your clothes out. Only take a few minutes. Then go out there to that truck and show him where your car is, and he can tow it back. I'll wait till he gets back, then take you up to the Roadside Inn with me, and you can dry off in there. It's warm, and if you want you can hire a cabin and rest up while we get your car fixed. Okay? You're not wrecked, are you?"

Kamm felt pretty well wrecked, but Slint got the meaning better.

"No, the car just — It doesn't work."

Kamm and Slint wrung their clothes out, dried off with a convenient endless roll of paper towel and put the clothes back on, after which they felt colder and wetter than before. Then they staggered out to the truck, where "Sam" called out cheerfully, "Climb in, boys. She ain't comfort, but she's sure transportation."

The battered door clanged shut, the gears ground, the engine roared and Sam rolled up his window and turned the heater on high. "Almost forgot. Don't want you boys to catch cold." He relit the end of a short thick black cigar and puffed convulsively. Clouds of greasy gray smoke began to circulate around the inside of the cab. The gears ground again, the truck rolled faster, and Sam shouted over the engine noise, "South, ain't she? Down that way?"

Kamm nodded, his eyes smarting as Sam puffed.

"Hokay," said Sam cheerfully, "here we go."

The gears ground again, the engine speeded up, the heater threw a blast of recirculated hot air, Sam puffed busily, and shouted over the roar of the engine, "How far?"

"Oh —" said Kamm dizzily. "About —"

"Mile? Mile and a half?"

Slint spoke up, his voice growing louder and fainter. "Down at that — at the —"

Kamm caught on as Slint signaled telepathically for help.

"The Parking Area," said Kamm.

"Oh. To the left of the road?"

Kamm didn't know for certain what "left" was, but he caught the mental picture. "Yeah."

The truck ground noisily along, bouncing two inches at every one-inch bump in the road. The heater labored heroically at the captive air. Sam lit a fresh thick black cigar, and stuck the smouldering stub of

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his old one in an open ash receptacle on the panel just in front of Kamm. Slint, next to the door, had his nose against a crack between door and cab, but Kamm got fresh and stale smoke both.

Ahead of them, a big truck labored under a pall of black smoke coming out a pipe thrust up in the air, and blowing straight back at them.

"Diesel," grunted Sam, around the end of his cigar. "Ain't they stinkers, though?"

Slint recoiled from his crack.

A new odor blended with the fresh cigar, wet clothes, stale cigar, could-cure fumes, hot grease and faint leak of exhaust gas from a hidden crack somewhere. Dutifully the heater blended and recirculated them all, at a slightly higher temperature.

A desperate question jumped Kamm's mind to Slint and back again.

Simultaneously, they teleported back to the clearing. Leaning against a tree trunk, they gasped for air.

"Great space," groaned Kamm. "we're whipped," said Slint, choking in big gasps of air. "If this planet is like this all over, we're done for. We'll have to go back and admit it's hopeless."

"It *can't* be that bad," said Kamm. "We've just had bad luck, that's all. Look, it's stopped raining. We can teleport right into the city."

Slint looked up. There was a cold wind blowing, and ragged dark clouds rushing by, but that was all. A flicker of hope passed over his dispirited features. "It *has* stopped raining, hasn't it? Of course, with these soggy clothes—"

"Nothing simpler. We'll run them through the fabricator, and they'll come out minus the water."

As with one mind, they teleported into the spacer, where they were immediately jabbed by all manner of jutting levers and handles, most of them fitted with the jagged projections that the Arcturans were so fond of, because they helped them get a firm grip.

"Uh," grunted Slint. "Can't get them off in here. But there's that icy wind outside—"

Kamm was draped around trying to get at his shoe, but the jagged end of the Number Four gravitor-control bar was in the way.

"Phew," he said, "nothing to do but reconvert to Arcturan form. If we start thrashing around in here and hit the wrong thing, we'll be in a mess. You can't control the miserable ship unless you're jelly-fished out like an egg on a pan, gripping half-a-dozen levers in opposite ends of the cabin, and working them all at the same time. Let us knock just one of these out of position, and we'll get flipped end-for-end, and wrecked."

"Yeah, nothing else to do," groaned Slint. "We'll have to reconvert."

Kamm relaxed and made an effort. Slint muttered something under his breath.

Kamm grunted with effort.

Slint spat out a curse.

Sweat ran down Kamm's face.

Nothing happened.

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Slint said, "I can't do it!"

Dizzily, Kamm tried again.

Again, nothing happened.

Slint burst out furiously, *"Now I see it!"*

"Watch out!" yelled Kamm. "Don't move! You'll wreck us!"

"Let's get out of here."

"All right. But no sudden moves."

They teleported to the outside.

"The trouble," said Slint savagely, "is that we're protoplasmically poisoned. That's the very thing that imbecilic recorder warned us to look out for before we started."

"You're right," said Kamm. "But what was it? The cigarette, the cold cure, the cigar smoke, or that truck?"

"I don't know *what* it was, but we've had it."

"Phew!" said Kamm. "Then we're stranded. No one but an Arcturan can run that ship. And if we can't convert to Arcturan form —"

"We'll just have to purify ourselves," said Slint. "We'll have to stick right with the ship, eat from the fabricator, breathe fumeless air —"

Kamm squinted at the city in the distance, noticing the smoke blown away from the tall smokestacks.

"How do we work that?" he demanded. "Look there. And exactly how do we eat from the fabricator, if we can't reconvert? Those controls are *recessed,* remember? Like the communicator controls."

Slint groaned. "How do we let anyone know the spot we're in?"

"I don't think I'd want to. They'd assume we went native."

"Well, we can't just stay here and *starve.* We've got to do *something.*"

"Let's head for that city. Maybe it's not so bad as it seems."

They teleported into the city in two fast jumps, landing on a sidewalk near a busy street corner.

The traffic light changed, and cars streamed past two abreast on both sides of the street. The air filled with a faint blue smoke. Gasoline fumes surrounded them.

"No good," snarled Kamm.

They teleported back to the clearing.

Slint stared exasperated at the city.

"That stuff will infiltrate everywhere. There are *thousands* of those vehicles. *Tens* of thousands. *Hundreds* —"

"That's out," said Kamm.

"Well, what do we do? How about the country? A nice quiet farm? We could work as laborers, herd the animals, eat pure natural food —"

"Good idea!" said Kamm. "Let's go."

By a series of teleport jumps, they got out at open country, located a farm —

— Where a tractor *put-putted* across several hundred acres of open fields, dragging behind it a contraption that sprinkled greenish-white dust over the rows of little plants. By the farmhouse, a woman guided a machine with attachment that squirted a cloud of bug spray at the side of the house. A lanky youth in blue jeans came out of the house with cigarette trailing out

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of the corner of his mouth, threw it on the grass, stepped on it and leaned into the open engine compartment of a car. With one hand, he reached in the car window and pushed on something as he worked the flat of his hand up and down on some kind of cylindrical opening.

Gray smoke rolled out the tailpipe. The boy worked furiously, jumped inside the car, got the smoke pouring out, emerged jubilantly, stuck a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, lit up —

"Uh-uh," said Kamm. "Chemical dust on the plants, spray on the house, gas fumes, cigarette smoke — Maybe a — What do they call it? — 'Home on the range' — you know, where they ride along slowly —"

"That's no good, either," said Slint. "I saw a — I think it's a 'documentary?' Well, anyway, now they don't use horses. They use something called 'eeps.' They run on gas."

"There must be some place on this planet. Something primitive, but yet where we can fit in easy, so we won't starve or get irreversibly poisoned, or have to fight savages with blowguns, like in that late-night movie where the two men and the girl —"

Slint snapped his fingers.

"I've got it. All we have to do is round up maybe a hundred fake documents, and with *our* talents, that should be easy!"

"What is it?" demanded Kamm, hardly daring to hope.

"I'll tell you. On the TV the other night, there as this item, remember?" He threw it to Kamm telepathically, and Kamm's head spun with the beauty of the idea.

"Come on. Let's not waste time!"

The recruiter was beaming as he shook hands with them. Not everyone eagerly volunteered for the most primitive possible territories. The special feather in his cap was that this was the sixth pair of husky, upstanding, highly-recommended young idealists to volunteer through *his* office in just the last ninety days.

"Men," he said, "you may find it rough and tough, the pay low and the conditions miserable. But the important fact is the comradeship and the service to all humanity. That, of course, is what you volunteered for. To serve humanity."

He blew out a cloud of cigarette smoke as their eyes filled with some unnamed emotion.

"Men," he said, "I'm proud of you."

And thinking of the near-miraculous reports that had filtered back about the other five pairs of volunteers from his district, he beamed emotionally upon them, ground out the cigarette and gripped them by the arms.

"Welcome to the Peace Corps!"

END

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THE COLONY THAT FAILED

by JACK SHARKEY

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

Norcriss faced his strangest Space Zoology mission—on a world where the dead walked and the living died!

I

"These wildcat colonists give me a pain," Lieutenant Norcriss, scowling through the viewport at the group of five men and eleven women standing forlornly beyond the steel mesh fence of the landing field. "They go along for months ignoring authority, laughing at regulations, doing as they damn well please, then all at once they get in trouble and they want Earth to bail them out of it!"

"Don't be too hard on them, sir," said Ensign Bob Ryder, Norcriss' technician. "They don't like our coming any more than you do. Think what this is doing to their collective ego."

"Well," Norcriss admitted grudgingly, stepping away from the 'port and returning to his rapidly cooling coffee on the ward room table. "I suppose that is a consideration. When they've come this far without help, it must irk them a little to have to call in outsiders . . . Even so — !" He shook his head, the compartment lights glinting on his close-cropped stark white hair, a startling — and misleading — indication of great age in combination with so youthful a face, although

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his eyes—if you looked deep enough—mirrored an uncanny aura of near-eons of antiquity, as of a man who has lived through many generations of life; which, indeed, he had.

Norcriss was a Learner. With the assistance of Ryder he had lived through the combined lives of countless fauna on the habitable planets of the universe, his mind imprisoned in the alien bodies via the almost supernatural process known as Contact while he studied their physical capabilities, temperaments, and varied ecological relationships from the inside out.

"I know they've cut some corners, sir," Ryder said. "And Earth has reason to be a little irritable about it, but they are Earth-people, and they do need help."

"They should never have attempted settling until the planet was thoroughly checked out and pronounced suitable," said Norcriss.

"They thought it was," Ryder reminded him. "They even pooled their resources and rented a roborocket to check out their environment before they landed. The readings on the tapes showed no signs of unclassified life-forms. They were certain they could handle any emergencies which arose."

"So here they are with a grate full of burning chestnuts," muttered the zoologist, "and I have to do the barehanded hero bit!" He drank his coffee thirstily and set down the empty cup with a clatter. "How many have they lost?"

"Three women and ten men," Ryder told him again. "They were originally fifteen couples, when they landed here a month ago. One woman died during the landing. Had a cardiac complication she'd kept from her husband."

"Damn fools," mumbled Norcriss. "If they'd gone through channels, been checked out by competent medics, gotten a planet already pronounced fit for habitation—!"

"Some people can't abide that rigmarole," Ryder said, and got to his feet. "Are you ready to begin, sir?"

Norcriss stared for a moment at his empty cup, as though he'd have enjoyed finding yet another mouthful of coffee therein, to give him an excuse to delay the inevitable. "Ready, Ensign," he said.

Outside the ship, the flame-baked, smoking soil had cooled sufficiently to permit the survivors to enter onto the landing field. They stood a short distance back from the gleaming vertical body of the ship and waited in silence for the metal door to open. When it did, and Norcriss emerged, along with Ryder and a number of equipment-laden crewmen, no one in the group made a move to come forward. Norcriss went to them.

"If there have been any new developments since your last radioed report," he said, "this is the time to tell me."

The group looked slowly at one another, then faced him again with a shake of heads. "Nothing at all," a woman spoke up. "We've all stayed indoors since—since the last incident, living on the space rations. What's left of them."

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Norcriss nodded. The colony was to have been agrarian. By now, some of the simpler vegetables — augmented by the profusion of wild game on the planet— should have been supplying their tables. But a colony of farmers can't live off the land so long as the men who go out to the fields in the morning don't return at night. Nor ever again, for that matter.

"You're sure no one has seen anything amiss? Our tapes check out precisely as yours did. No unknown forms of hostile animal life. If you can't give me a clue it means that I must check out every single animal on the planet! You know how long *that* can take."

They nodded, solemnly. The Contact process, once begun, lasted forty minutes per Learning, no matter if Norcriss Learned the enhosted species in a second, or had not the necessary time to Learn the creature at all — if, for instance, he was enhosted during a phase of dormancy. And that could entail months of slow investigation, unless he were fortunate enough to Contact the species causing all the trouble in one of his earlier attempts.

"We wish we did know more," a man said. "If we had a clue we might be able to handle this ourselves."

"Handling things yourselves," Norcriss said sharply, "is what got you into this mess!" The man subsided, shamefaced. Norcriss ran his eyes over the assembled colonists' faces. "The smallest thing might be important," he prompted. "Anything unusual. A sound. A shift in the wind. A footprint. Anything for which you can't account."

His eye caught a brief motion, but when he turned his head swiftly that way, the woman who had been opening her mouth to speak had closed it again and was staring at the ground, her teeth softly worrying the inside of her lower lip, her cheeks a bit pinker than before.

"Please," Norcriss said to her, gently. "Anything at all. Even if you think it's foolish."

"Well," she said, not lifting her eyes to meet his, "it's just a —" Her head came up suddenly, and she flashed him a helpless, sad-eyed smile. "It can't mean anything. I may even have imagined it."

A young man, leathery of face from years of working outdoors, with the wiry build and calloused hands of a hard-laboring farmer, twisted about and gripped the woman tightly by the upper arms. "Shut up!" he rasped. "You just shut up and stop your crazy talk! I don't want to hear it again!"

The woman, whimpering in his grasp, began to cry, and struggled to get free. The other four men gripped the youth with hands as powerful as his own and dragged him back. The woman rushed into the arms of the girl nearest her, and began to sob upon her shoulder, while the girl helplessly embraced her and made futile patting motions against the shivering back. All this happened in a few startling seconds, before Norcriss or Ryder, who stood near at hand, could make a move or say a word.

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The zoologist finally found his voice and said, "What was that all about?"

The woman was too hysterical to reply, and the young man who had become so outraged stood rigidly — the others no longer holding him — with his lips clamped angrily shut, breathing heavily through flaring nostrils. One of the other men laid a hand upon his shoulder, and said, "Take it easy, Chuck. No one means any disrespect. But it might be important."

The young man stiffened, then suddenly whirled about and rushed off the field, disappearing into the group of small prefabricated-plastic dwellings a few hundred yards beyong the steel mesh barrier which marked off the landing area. The man who had spoken to him turned to Norcriss.

"Don't be too hard on him, sir. He's had it pretty tough. See, his wife died during our landing here, after all the months they'd planned the trip, after all the trip itself. He was pretty busted up for a couple of weeks, afterward. And then Angela, here —" he indicated the still-weeping woman — "got a notion into her head that she heard Doreen — that was Chuck's wife — singing out in the fields, just about the time the other people in our party started disappearing. You can see why he'd be upset. He told her then never to say it again. So today —" The man ended his sentence with a shrug.

"I understand," Norcriss said, frowning speculatively. "I guess it's been pretty rough on all of you." He looked over the group once more, still frowning. "Tell me," he said. "Now that Chuck's gone, it won't be so hard. Is Angela the only one who heard her?"

There was much lowering of eyes and covert glances at one another and nervous fidgeting before anyone replied. Then a woman said, in a weak, almost mouse-like voice, "I—I heard *someone* singing . . . out there . . . that first time . . ."

She fell silent, and no one else ventured to add to what she had said. Norcriss turned to Ryder; then lowering his voice so they could not hear. "Ensign. Do you feel what I do?"

"You mean that they all probably heard what she did, and are too scared to admit it? Yes, sir, I do."

Norcriss turned back to the colonists. "Is there any possibility at all that Doreen isn't dead?"

"If—" a man said uncomfortably, "if she wasn't, she's sure dead now." The man looked ashamed at his own ghoulish imaginings as he went on to explain, haltingly. "I mean — we checked her pulse, her breathing and all. She was as dead as we've ever seen. Then, of course, we had to bury her, so . . . if she *wasn't* dead—" the hapless speaker said, horribly uncomfortable, "she's dead enough now, from the burying."

Norcriss nodded. "I hate to say this but we're going to have to open that grave."

"Oh, no!" wailed one of the women. "Please—!"

"You people have been vanishing, one by one," he said trying to sound more businesslike than officious.

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"There has been a doubt raised as to the actuality of Doreen's death. If she is alive, she may know something of what has happened. It is unfortunately also possible that she may somehow be involved. The grave must be opened."

One of the men stepped forward. "I'll take you there." Then he glanced toward the cluster of dwellings beyond the field, and unconsciously lowered his voice as he continued speaking, as though Chuck could have heard. "We'll skirt the village there, if you don't mind, sir. I don't think it's going to hurt any if Chuck never knows."

"I understand," said Norcriss. "Let's go there."

A half-hour later, the soil having been deftly levered from the grave by quick-working crewmen with portable power-scoops, they came upon Doreen's coffin. It was simply built of plain planks hewn from the trees of the planet she had not survived long enough to tread upon. A strong, heavily nailed coffin, built by men who knew how to work with their hands. The wood was heavy and thick, and the lid had been fastened firmly into place. At this coffin Norcriss and Ryder, and the clustered crewmen and colonists now gazed in stupefaction.

The boards were shattered and riven apart as by a giant fist, and the torn linens of the lining were stained with watery seepage. One unbroken point in the material bore the muddy imprint of a woman's hand.

Otherwise the grave was empty.

II

"Well," Ensign Ryder said to the zoologist, back at the ship, "what are we up against, sir?"

Norcriss looked once more at the photograph they'd been able to get of Doreen Paulson, a candid snapshot taken by another of the colonists during the voyage. It showed a smooth-skinned, clear-eyed brunette, attractive in sleeveless denim blouse and shorts, her hair drawn back and out of her way into a long, single braid, her face smiling in surprise at the observer, as though she had glanced up from her work and realized there was a camera on her an instant before the shutter had moved. "Whatever it is, it's easy to see why Chuck Paulson's so shaken. She was a beautiful young thing. A little on the fragile side, but that only increased her appeal. A white rose can hold its own against a sea of red and pink ones." His face was grave as he set the snapshot down.

"Maybe I ought to remind you," Ryder said, though he was aware Norcriss knew more than he ever would about Contact, "that you cannot be enhosted in an intelligent being, that is, a rational animal like man . . . Or isn't that what's worrying you?"

Norcriss stared at him in some surprise, then caught his drift. "Oh. No, that's not it, Ensign. I wasn't concerned about getting into Contact and finding myself strolling about in Doreen Paulson's resur-

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rected body. What's annoying me is the broken coffin."

Bob Ryder flashed him a quizzical look. "How do you mean?"

"What could have broken it?" demanded Norcriss. "And how?"

"I don't understand," said Ryder, shaking his head. "It was either a man, or a woman, or some animal, or—"

"But how? That burial place is out of sight of the village, thanks to a dip in the land and considerable intervening shrubbery. But not out of earshot!"

Some of the puzzlement cleared from Ryder's features, then was replaced by even greater puzzlement. "I think I see, sir. It couldn't have been smashed up like that without somebody hearing it; it'd sound almost like cannon-fire when those inch-thick planks snapped in two. But, damn it, it was done! No one's reported hearing a thing!"

"Except Doreen Paulson's singing," said Norcriss.

Ryder shivered, remembering. "So what do we do, sir? Those people are five times as scared now as they were when we landed. We've got to find the answer, before there's nothing left to colonize this planet but gibbering idiots."

"Can you take a tape-reading of an inanimate object?" Norcriss demanded suddenly.

"Sir," protested Ryder, "you know the tape only registers life-pulses of creatures, according to their gradation on the evolutionary scale of known fauna."

"But aren't there even traces left? Some sort of residue? Can't anything so bizarre as living matter leave something behind it to show where it's been?"

"You mean the coffin, don't you!" said Ryder. "You think if I attempt a reading there, I might find out who or what was responsible for Doreen Paulson's disappearance!" He set his mouth in a stubborn line. "You know it won't work, sir. The scanners are more sensitive than a bloodhound's nose, but they can't tell you if there's anything to be pursued, any more than the bloodhound could. Isolate an odor — or even this ephemeral 'aura' of yours — in the area of the grave, and how do you know it's what you're after? Or do you think even the tapes can pinpoint one alien life-pulse 'residue' among the millions that will have left their traces in that open grave? Every fuzzy scrap of fungus, every wriggling bacterium, every skittering insect, every bit of broken claw, shed hair, fallen scale, lost feather — how will you know your quarry if you do find it!?"

"For that matter," Norcriss retorted irritably, "how will I avoid skimming over that selfsame quarry even if I make Contact with every last life-form on this planet?!" He thudded the base of his fist softly, steadily, upon the ward room tabletop. "And I can only check one of any given species at a time, Ryder! What if the villain's a dog! I could send my mind through a billion dogs and come up with the same response of 'harmless domestic canine' without ever once hitting

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upon the solitary rabid one who'd as soon tear a man's throat out as look at him!"

"My machines are as near perfect as machines can be," Ryder said defensively. "But they can't register everything, sir! A canine registers on the tapes as a canine; it can't also give us the dog's state of health, including carious teeth and number of fleas!"

"Okay, okay," Norcriss apologized by his tone. "It's nobody's fault we're stuck like this. But it's been almost half an hour since we opened that grave and came back here for a conference, and those folks outside are getting uneasy. The longer we dawdle, the uneasier they get. And a long series of Contacts with no results aren't going to give their minds any more stability, believe me. Or mine, either," he added. "Don't forget the risks I take with just one Contact! If my host drops dead while my mind's aboard, so do I!"

"Sir, we could be here a thousand years," Ryder said, "and you wouldn't even have completed investigating the insects alone!"

"Then do as I suggested," said Norcriss. "Please."

"You mean pulse-check the grave?"

"What've we got to lose?" said the zoologist. "We have no starting-point now. We won't be any worse off afterwards."

"It's a big waste of time, sir . . ." sighed Ryder, but he was already getting up and starting for the corridor, to get the tools and equipment he would need.

A quarter of an hour later, Ryder was quietly vowing to keep his big mouth shut in the future. Beneath the curve of tough transparent plastic housing the calibrated dial of the life-pulse scanner, the needle had leaped from the zero-point and was remaining steady at just short of the bright red calibration that indicated "Man."

"That," Bob Ryder said ruefully, a part of his mind grateful that Norcriss had made no comment about the moving of the needle; "automatically eliminates almost all the lower life-forms, sir. Whatever's pushing this needle—maybe even that residue you postulated—is well into the vertebrate class of development . . . Though that's a matter of degree, you understand. It doesn't necessarily mean an actual spine and complementary skeletal structure. But there is something, something just short of being rational, that is — or, if your 'residue' theory is correct, that has been — at this grave. You going to try a Learning?"

Norcriss nodded. Four of the crewmen, without waiting for further orders, headed back toward the ship for the gear.

Shortly afterward, adjusting the helmet upon his head, and lying supine upon the couch that would house his mindless body for the forty minutes of Contact, Norcriss signalled to the technician that he was ready, there beside the open grave.

Ryder, having set his own controls precisely to that calibration detected by the scanner, threw the

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switch that would detach his superior's consciousness from its physical brain and transport it instantaneously to the brain of the unsuspecting host-to-be, whatever it was.

Norcriss felt the silent lancing of lightning through his mind, and then —

—he was in Contact.

III

It was dark, dark and comfortably warm. Norcriss sent feelers of thought out through his host, not yet taking control of the brain in which his mind dwelt, trying to determine by use of the position-receptors alone just what sort of creature he inhabited.

Nothing came to him. It was as though the creature had no limbs or muscle-structure at all, as though it had no parts to be sensed or to be moved. And yet, the warmth—the comfortable sensation of slowly absorbing energy — was real enough. So there was some sort of surface to the creature, or it could not feel this sort of comfort. Carefully then, Norcriss assumed control.

His first instinct was to open his eyes — that is, the eyes of his host — and scan his temporary body visually. Sight is the sense upon which man places the most reliance, and in this instinctive behavior, Norcriss was no different from anyone else. But despite his repeated trials not a glimmer of light or darkness came to him, nor was there even a hint of a straining "eyelid' or analogous structure.

"So it's blind," he thought. "And yet, there is such a sense of contentment in the creature that this blindness cannot be other than its natural state. No indication of fear, of wonder, of panic. It rests contentedly, without tension in its body, so it must be used to blindness."

But he was bothered greatly. The concepts of great strength and unutilized potency were strong within this creature. Such a sensation was incompatible with its being sightless, and therefore helpless to defend itself.

He tried hearing next. But there came to him only the faintest of noises, all unidentifiable. A sort of steady, distant rumbling. A hint of soft breezes blowing. And — more subsonic awareness than actual sound — the knowledge of moving waters, possibly a distant booming of surf upon a beach.

Norcriss moved on to taste, then to smell, but in each endeavor drew a complete blank. The host could not see, could not savor, could not smell and could just barely hear. And yet it remained placidly confident and potentially strong!

That left the sense of touch. Though Norcriss knew that the body he inhabited was quite still, and therefore unlikely to even feel a bed of nails beneath it — tactile sensations being quite fleeting unless constantly stimulated by motion — he sent out his thoughts along its "flesh". Which could of course, be chitinous, or scaly, or even the fragile enclosure of a single-celled amoeba, for all he knew. The size of hosts could not be detected by a

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Learner save through comparison with known-size objects. An elephant, for instance, had no idea it was "big", but simply supposed all other jungle beasts to be "small." He hoped therefore to study the host, if necessary, by a sort of Braille, as it were.

And the moment he tried to "feel—"

He could *see.*

The host, only apparently blind, was not precisely sightless. It could feel *light* with its body, and this sensation came to Norcriss, enhosted therein, as vision.

But what vision! It was like trying to look at a landscape through a kaleidoscope! Blue sky and white clouds and upthrusting trunks of trees all superimposed one upon the other, in a chaotic jumble! Norcriss attempted to sort one clear image, one focal point of attention, out of the jumble, but could not succeed. It was as though the light-sensitive areas of the creature were jouncing on a string like yo-yos, tilting like seesaws, swinring like pendulums. Almost nauseated by the giddy visual montage of sights, Norcriss hastily withdrew control, and let himself lie dormant in the creature's brain while he tried to make some sense out of what he had just witnessed.

Of only one thing could he be certain. The creature was lying "face" upward. In all that whirl of appearing and vanishing sights, he had detected no sign of soil or water, though there was a memory of murky wetness for which he could not account. But he had seen sky and clouds and a vision of trees from somewhere beneath. So this strangely motionless, yet powerful, creature was on its back, basking in the sunlight. More than that he could not tell.

Floating rootlessly in the alien brain, Norcriss thought once more of Doreen Paulson, and of those vanished colonists who had gone out to tend their fields and were never seen again. That there was a connection between them and the enhosted creature he had no doubt; detection of the creature via the scanner had occurred at Doreen's empty grave; and Doreen had been heard singing in the fields when the first of the colonists had disappeared. And, having decided this, he wondered if his host possessed some sort of memory . . .

It wasn't easy, delving through the alien mind for something so evanescent as a memory. In one's own mind well-known facts have a contrary way of eluding one's grasp, and the harder one gropes the more elusive they become, even things so familiar as the names of old friends, or the identity of a topic upon which one was conversing just prior to a brief interruption. Attempting to plumb the depths of the alien's brain was doubly difficult, since Norcriss had no real idea even in which mnemonic direction to start searching. But search he did, for what might have been seconds, or even most of his sojourn within the creature — time being subject to the host's own notion of temporal progression —keeping always the picture of Doreen Paulson at the

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forefront of his mind, so that when his own memory of her appearance struck upon that of the alien it might halt him in the proper investigative area.

Then his wandering consciousness was jolted to a halt.

The image of Doreen Paulson shattered as it ran up against its corresponding memory deep within the alien brain. And there, as Norcriss took control once again, he detected not a concrete memory of a young girl, but an abstraction of mind, and his own mind, naming this abstraction in his own human terms of reference, found: *Itchiness.*

Even as he found this bewildering concept, he realized that his assumption of control had been a fractional instant before the alien performed an *action.*

Somehow, he had gotten hold of the alien just before it tried to — his own terminology phrased inadequately — *scratch*!

But how could this apparently inert creature make such a move of counterirritation? Reducing control until it was but a featherweight away from complete relinquishment, the zoologist tuned in on the available senses once more. He "saw" through the light-sensitive areas of the flesh, and he "heard" that same distant rumble . . . except that the rumbling was focussing upon the Doreen-Paulson-concept in the alien . . .

And then Norcriss had it, and grabbed full control of the alien in a reaction of utter terror! It was mad, this sudden insight, completely mad! And yet, there was a way to check it out. . . Carefully he probed beyond the simple "itch" abstraction, searching for "sting" or "smart" or "ache". And found what he sought, almost immediately.

"Dear God," he prayed, "let me move fast enough!"

He knew not how long he clung to control, deep in that alien brain, repeating his prayer over and over, thinking of nothing else but what must be done the instant Contact was over—

Blinding, electric whiteness!

Norcriss sat up on the couch, tearing the helmet from his skull, and shouted one single word to the astounded technician and waiting crewmen.

"*Run!*"

A space zoologist was in absolute command of his men, since their very lives often rested upon his findings. The men were trained, their reflexes triggered, to instant, and unquestioning obedience.

Every last man turned and ran in the direction Norcriss had pointed, and the zoologist right after them, and only when they were a hundred yards away from the grass did he tell them they might halt their precipitate flight.

Ensign Ryder, gasping a bit for air, was the first to ask, "What's up, sir? You scared the hell out of us!"

"That's what's up," said Norcriss, pointing back the way they had fled, toward the open graveside they had left.

And when they looked, they saw Ryder's cherished control board, Norcriss' delicately constructed hel-

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met — and even the couch — tumbling into the grave, and being methodically chewed to rubble by the movements of the hole itself. Ryder turned a face of shocked, pallid perplexity toward his superior.

"Our unknown alien," Norcriss said, suddenly weak with mingled weariness and relief, "is the planet itself."

IV

Less than ten hours later, their spaceship was headed for home. Before they left they had herded the sorrowful survivors of the colony upon the other spaceship, the colonist's own and made certain they'd taken off for the long journey back to Earth before departing themselves.

"So the plant life was its eyes, huh?" Ryder was asking, interestedly, at dinner in the ward room. "The plants and the planet were all of a piece?"

Norcriss nodded, cutting deftly at a juicy slab of medium-rare beefsteak upon his plate. "That's why my field of vision was so unsteady," he said. "The swaying of the grass and the least movement of the leaves on the trees kept shifting my angle of vision before I could get a good look at anything. That murky bit I remember must have come from some of the undersea plant life that could just detect the sunlight over the water, but in the general blending of these visions I couldn't know what I was seeing."

"How about those sounds, though?" Ryder went on.

"I don't like to think about that part," Norcriss said. "The blowing wind and sea-noises are self-explanatory. But that first rumbling —" He twitched his shoulders as though touched by an icy finger. "That was the open grave area just about to engulf you people — and my body with you! I took control of the thing just in time, by luckiest accident, then. The second time I *knew* what I was doing."

"But how were you sure what you were up against?" said the technician. "I can see you suspecting it, but when you came awake you were so damned certain — "

"I checked it out," Norcriss said. "I figured that if the digging of the grave in the first place had produced an 'itch' in the planet's hide, then the rocket-thrust when our ship landed should *still* be giving it a lot of bother. I searched out that feeling, and had my answer. I found a bothersome stinging area, and quite near it an area just getting over an annoyance of the same nature; that was the spot beneath the colonist's rocket, of course."

"We're lucky its reactions were so nearly human, then," said Ryder. "I mean, if it had tried to do something about the *burn* — !"

"Our rocket — and the colonist's earlier — would be a heap of scrap metal, right now," nodded the zoologist. "But it preferred leaving burnt areas alone; they heal better if you don't fool with them. Besides, it *hurts* to move a burn. But an itch is another matter entirely. When you itch, you scratch, period. Lucky for us a planet isn't the fastest mov-

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er possible. Its mentality and synaptic system are pretty sluggish. From the time we dug the grave open again, up until nearly the time Contact was over, it hadn't yet been able to coordinate its planetary crust into motion against the itch."

"Well, it all makes sense, now," said Ryder, digging into his own steak. "Every time those poor would-be planters started in trying to seed the soil, the planet would react to the hole in its hide and start chewing everything in the vicinity of the tilled area." He shivered. "It's a pretty horrible way to go, getting masticated alive by the very ground you're standing on. Or trying to stand on." Then he looked up in puzzlement. "But say — one thing . . ."

"I know," said Norcriss. "Doreen Paulson's singing. They heard it, all right. The reason was that Doreen, dead in her grave, wasn't as bad an irritation as those tillers were. I mean, she was still, and quiet, and her only bother was that she was a foreign body in the planet's flesh, and in a relatively healed area, too, once the grave was filled in over her coffin. So it didn't react so violently there. It chewed until the coffin was shattered — beneath the earth, no one heard it breaking, of course. Then it began to crush this foreign body down into its components, so that the irritation would cease. But somehow, her head must have risen above the surface of the soil, and the push-pull of the planet acted upon her lungs just as artificial respiration acts on a person. Every exhalation brought sounds — wordless, naturally — from her vocal cords. That was the 'singing' that Angela and the others heard. But only, you remember, at *first*, when that initial disappearance of colonists began. Later, her body was pulverized out of existence. The coffin, though was of this planet's own substance and did not bother it. After Doreen's removal it was left alone."

"So, in a way," Ryder said, wryly philosophical, "the death of Doreen Paulson on that first landing was a good thing for the rest of the colonists."

Norcriss sighed, nodding. "At least her grave gave us an area in which we could begin to look for the culprit. Still," he said, remembering that bright-eyed face, and the functional, pretty single braid at the back of the head, "if you were Chuck Paulson, how good would you feel about it?" **END**

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DAY of the EGG

BY ALLEN KIM LANG

Illustrated by NODEL

Perfidious devils! Their tricks were nearly as low and underhanded as our own!

I

"Put your back into it, you white rascal! Pull, dem your eyes! Tug, man! Tug till I can hear your bones creak."

Admiral Sir Nigel Mountchessington-Jackson, his eyes bulging and his brown face gone puce with the pressure, puffed out his breath in an effort to ease an inch of slack between his person and Panetela, the most severe of his corsets.

Redleg planted a stockinged foot in the small of his superior's back and leaned all his weight against the laces. Gasping, face a-sweat, he tied the corset strings and stepped away to survey the results of his constriction. "Perhaps, sir, we'd best wear Corona to the Royal Reception," he said. "Were one of those strings to snap at the instant your Excellency is bent over the wing of Her Majesty to kiss it, our dress uniform would shatter about the Grand Ballroom like so much gold-and-purple confetti."

"Can't let our side down, Redleg," the Admiral said. "Trim and deter-

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mined I mean to appear tonight. Determined and trim whatever the cost in personal discomfort." He viewed his figure, a broad hourglass, in the mirror. "I'll have the dickey now, if you please."

Redleg trotted around the Ambassador to fasten his collar-stud. "If I may say so, sir, you'd be well advised to make your bows this evening rather less profound than usual," he said.

"I doubt I can incline a degree off perpendicular, the way my tripes are trussed up in this demned armor-plate," the Admiral said. "You victual me too bloody well, Redleg. I should have brought along a proper English batman, a tomato-frier and spinach-boiler, instead of a ruddy kitchen magician who's forever whippin' up Froggish messes that would tempt Saint Anthony into breakin' Lent."

"If you insist, sir, I'll emphasize low-calorie dishes for the next few weeks," Redleg said. "They're doing marvels nowadays with whipped cellulose."

"Cellulose and calories," the Ambassador growled. "Stuff and nonsense, I say." He fit the scarlet sash of the Order of Charles the Third across his chest and held it in place while Redleg, wrapping the cummerbund's golden ribbon, circled him like a May-dancer.

As his aide retired to get the ambassadorial evening jacket, Sir Nigel pondered by the window overlooking the avenues of Ovum. He watched the natives, flying from jeweled tower to silver pinnacle. Some clutched parcels in their beaks, others wove patterns in the air like boys skylarking with bicycles. Brilliant-featured as Brazilian birds they were, graceful as chimney-swifts.

"Pretty place, if you happen to be a demned canary," the Admiral muttered, drumming fingers on the glass. Appointed sweet Albion's Ambassador Plenipotentiary to the Matriarchate of Mum fortnight since, Sir Nigel confessed finding the planet a shade too flighty to suit his taste. "Like living in the birdcage at Regent's Park," he'd once remarked.

Redleg came out with the tailed jacket. Sir Nigel shrugged into it and smoothed down the cordon of medals. He did a right-face, left-face in front of the mirror. "A bit much, wouldn't you say?" he asked.

"Were you less colorful than the rainbow, sir, the natives would fear you were in mourning," Redleg said. "If I dare say so, the Admiral strikes a bold and martial note." He buckled the official sword to Sir Nigel's side.

"Quite so," the Ambassador agreed. He set the tricorn on his head and glowered into the mirror. "After all, one is called upon for presence, when one represents one's motherland in foreign climes. I'll be visiting the Palace Royal as sweet Albion personified, meeting with her Majesty the Matriarch, touring the Imperial Hatchery, feeling out the local sentiment for a treaty that means safety or defeat for our own dear monarch. Heavy matters, Redleg." Sir Nigel grasped the hilt of

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his sword and experimented with poses suitable for a series of postage stamps. He frowned. "Dare say that demned Hun will be at the Palace this evening," he said.

"Generalfeldmarschall Graf Gerhard von Eingeweide's name is indeed inscribed on the guest list, sir," Redleg said. "The Mumese could no more overlook the Ambassador from Stahlheim than they could slight your own Excellency."

"How you smell out these Palace minutiae amazes me," Sir Nigel said. "I expect you have some serving-chick backstairs eatin' out of your hand. Eh, Redleg? Between us men, isn't it a bit of *cherchez la femme* with you?"

"*Honi soit qui mal y pense,* rather, your Excellency," the Embassy factotum replied, smiling.

"Enough of this nattering," Sir Nigel said. "Get into uniform, Redleg, and hustle up the carriage."

Redleg saluted. "Immediately, Excellency."

"I trust none of those demned birds will take a mind to shut off the 'copter's engines whilst we're en route," Mountchessington - Jackson said darkly. He peered down into the parkland that stretched between Embassy Row and the tooth-pick-towers of the Palace Royal. "Be bit of a drop."

"A drop, sir?" Redleg asked, his nostrils quivering.

"You're driving," the Admiral said. "But no matter, this once. You may join me in a Frobisher, easy on the lemon-peel. Best to clear our throats, what?"

"Just as you say, sir; and thank you, sir." Redleg stepped out for a moment and returned with two sparkling drinks. "I took the liberty of having these ready on ice, sir," he said.

"Good head on your shoulders," Sir Nigel acknowledged. He raised his glass. "To the Queen, man! Our Queen!"

"To the Queen!"

"Off with you, now."

The Ambassador stepped out onto the boarding platform to wait for his carriage. A few natives — provincials, judging by their cheek—fluttered past, chattering comments about the unwinged human with the stick strapped to his side. A crocodile of schoolchildren, kindergarteners, followed their teacher in bright-eyed silence as she, scarlet-feathered, lectured them about the fantastic inhabitants of the outer planets of their sun, Albion and Stahlheim. Sir Nigel longed to swat the little blighters back to school with the flat of his sword. "Never cared overmuch for birds," he said to himself. "Not unless they're served on a platter, next a cold bottle."

Redleg, something of a cowboy the moment he touched the saddle of the Embassy helicopter, swooped down to the boarding platform as though he were about to rope and brand a stray doggie. The Mumese kindergarten class and the country tourists bustled back from his prop-wash, tittering over the clumsiness of unfeathered bipeds. Hand gripping his sword-hilt Sir Nigel Mountchessington-Jackson stepped aboard.

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"Pop right over to the Palace, Admiral?" Redleg shouted back.

"Do that, man! And steer small, dem your eyes," the Ambassador snapped. The moment Redleg got inside those RAF blues, he seemed to lose all proper respect for the Senior Service.

They flapped away from the Embassy. "Evenin' of destiny," Sir Nigel bellowed. "The Mumese Queen must decide between Albion and the bloodly Boche. Them not with us is again' us, what?"

"Just as you say sir."

"Handsomely! now. Wouldn't do to buffet-about any of our feathered friends," Sir Nigel yelled. "Not only would they likely shut off our engine — as the Yanks put it, they'd shut off our water for good."

"I'll be walking on eggs, so to speak, sir," Redleg promised.

The flight across the Oval, great verdant focus of the Matriarchate's patriotic song and verse, was uneventful, although the Ambassador kept his fingers curled under his seatbelt, ready to pull up in futile reflex should one of the natives flying beside them elect to sabotage the 'copter's electrical system with a flood of mental malice.

It had happened before. This skill at electronic marplottery was what made the avian people of Mum, the second planet, and Stahlheim, the fourth. Whatever it was that these birdmen did, whether it was to hump their hypophyses or to strain their syringes, the result was the utter confusion of every electromagnetic field within a country mile. Lovely. The planet that could count the Matriarchate of Mum its ally reduced its enemies to bowstring-plucking and flint-knapping.

II

Drums paradiddled, trumpets hooted in loon-chorus as the carriage of the Ambassador Plenipotentiary of Albion touched down on the landing-platform of the Palace Royal.

Redleg was out of the pilot's seat in a trice, holding a stiff palm-cut salute with his right hand, the lion-and-unicorn-blazoned door in his left. Conscious of slipping into gear with History, Sir Nigel stepped onto the platform. He returned his equerry's salute with the naval palm-down, and removed his tricorn to bow a short bow in the direction of the Mumese banner fluttering at the Palace entrance, its device a golden egg on a field of green.

Sir Kekketeks Kekketak, Lord High Chamberlain, stepped forward as Sir Nigel was replacing his hat.

"Her Majesty, sad to say, is indisposed, sir," he said. "We sincerely hope that She will be strong enough to make an appearance later in the evening."

"I pray good health and long life for Her Majesty," the Ambassador said, fluting the Mumese phrases through his teeth. "Come, Redleg," he snapped in English.

"The Prince Consort will receive your salute," the Chamberlain added. "He is presently in conference with his Excellency, Generalfeldmarschall Graf Gerhard von Eingeweide, Ambassador Plenipotentiary

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of our mutual sister-world, the most puissant Stahlheim."

"Demned Boche would be bending the royal cockscomb's ear," Sir Nigel gritted at Redleg. "The Hun would go any lengths to win a concordat with the Matriarch."

"And you, sir?" Redleg enquired.

"I'd sit myself on the Egg Royal till hatch-time to do it," Mountchessington-Jackson confessed.

The Grand Ballroom seethed with the noble souls and gracious of the Matriachate. A string quartet made Muzak at the end of the hall. Green-liveried waiters scurried about with trays of cocktail glasses — filled, Sir Nigel knew from bitter experience, with nothing more interesting than the sweet juices of native fruits.

The trumpeters blasted "Attention." The Royal Herald shouted, "His Excellency, the Ambassador Plenipotentiary from the most glorious Kingdom of Albion!"

Sir Nigel and Redleg stood at the salute as the strings picked up the strains of *God Save the Queen.*

"Stand easy," the Ambassador said.

The golden drapes at one side of the ballroom parted. The Prince Consort, a mauve and wilted fellow, stepped out in the company of Generalfeldmarschall von Eingeweide.

"How lean that human is!" a countess to Sir Nigel's right twittered to her escort. "Not at all like the other, the one so delightfully egg-shaped.

Sir Nigel smiled. The smile faded as the Royal symphonette commenced playing *Stahlheim, Stahlheim Ueber Alles.*

"I expect we'd best salute to the nasty music," Redleg whispered.

The enemy anthem finished the two newcomers hastened to greet Mountchessington-Jackson. "So good of you to come, old fellow," the consort whistled.

"Your Royal Highness!" Sir Nigel said, bringing up a salute.

"No formality, please! I look upon us three as old friends together. Isn't that so, Gerhard?" the consort said.

"Quite right, your Highness," the Stahlheimer said. He clicked his heels and dipped his head toward Sir Nigel. The Albionese replied with the hand salute — so much an easier gesture than bowing, for a man who was trussed up in Panatela.

"Dear Gerhard has been regaling us with pleasantries concerning Stahlheim," the Prince Consort said. "We really must visit Helmburg, her Majesty and I, once she's recovered from her unfortunate illness."

"Do your Highness," von Eingeweide said.

"We dare to hope, sir, that you'll include in your tour a state visit to Camelot," Sir Nigel said.

"That would be jolly!" von Eingeweide said. "Perhaps you could show your Royal guests some shooting in the Norfolk Broads, Sir Nigel." He explained this to the prince. "The Albionese are beyond question the keenest gamesmen in our system your Highness. I've watched dear Sir Nigel bring down as many as

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twenty birds with a dozen well-placed shots."

"It sounds like smashing fun," the Prince Consort said, his beak puckering.

"Schweinhund, dul" Sir Nigel snapped. "A sneeze, your Highness," he added in Mumese.

"We three, we happy three, we band of brothers," the Prince Consort said. "The phrase is, I believe, from your national poet, Sir Nigel."

"Your Highness quotes with marvelous aptness," Mountchessington-Jackson said.

"We three will make an informal inspection of the palace on our own, sans heralds, sans footmen, sans trumpets," the prince went on. "Perhaps a sip of pomegranate juice and a slab of beetle-cheese in my apartments?"

"Delightful," Sir Nigel gasped.

"Buck up, old boy," von Eingeweide whispered. "It's the White Man's Burden, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Mountchessington - Jackson rested his hand, a rich, Carribean brown, on his sword-hilt.

"Coming, gentlemen?" the consort called. A footman held aside an arras, and the two humans followed the prince into the private salons of the palace.

"I do hope that her Majesty's indisposition is causing her no pain," Sir Nigel said.

"It's the pip, your Excellency," the prince said. He shook his head.

"Might there be something we of Albion could do?" Sir Nigel asked.

"The Ambassador means that his planet boasts remarkable veterinaries," von Eingeweide suggested.

The Prince spun on his heel. "Vets?" he demanded.

"I was proposing that our Queen's very Royal Physician would be honored to call upon her Majesty the Matriarch," Sir Nigel said.

The Prince Consort fixed Mountchessington-Jackson with a steely eye. "We have our own resources, sir, with which we will, as another of your poets said, muddle through."

"Indeed! Of course! My word, yes!" Sir Nigel said.

"You appear to be suffering from foot-and-mouth diesase yourself, old chap," von Eingeweide whispered.

"Were not my bootmaker a fastidious fellow, you dog, I'd treat you to one of those feet this instant!" Sir Nigel hissed.

The prince indicated a settee. An aide brought in a pitcher of juice and three glasses, together with a head of the orange-colored cheese, secreted by an insect domesticated by the Mumese, that was the planet's prime delicacy.

The prince sipped his juice, then set aside the glass. "We are not unaware," he said, "that bad blood exists betwixt the humans of Stahlheim and those of Albion. We would prefer, gentlemen, as original inhabitants of this system, as the autochthons, if you please, to remain aloof from what is precisely a family squabble."

"Am I to understand that your Highness means that the Matriarchate will sign a treaty with neither of our planets?" Sir Nigel asked.

The prince raised his wings in

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mock despair. "You are to understand no such thing!" he said. "My dear Sir Nigel, surely you must realize that I, poor consort, am a mere appendage to the court. No more than the trigger (if you will forgive an indelicate metaphor) to initiate the production of the Egg from which our nation's next Matriarch will hatch."

The consort nibbled a bit of cheese. "Mine is a curious office," he said. "As a chick, I had hoped that Mother would allow me to follow the vocation of poetry. My head sang lyrics. But my fate was prose. These gatherings, the pomp and circumstance of State, the gold rewards of artistic sterility: such was my meed once Mother had elected to graft our family to the royal stem. I speak of such private matters, gentlemen, only to acquaint you with my powerlessness in the great game of state. Believe me, my influence here is less than that of our pastry-cook. Does that clear the air?"

"Rather," Sir Nigel said. He tried some cheese. "Delicious," he said.

"You'll pop the fat, gold buttons off your fat, purple uniform if you don't take a care," von Eingeweide warned.

"I'd rather bulge a bit than be a boor," Sir Nigel said.

"Gentlemen, we must complete our tour." The prince rose. The ambassadors vied with one another to be first on their feet. "These State Dinners are as rigidly scheduled as so many rocket-launchings. In fourteen minutes the strings will sound out our anthem. *The Egg and I*, and turtle soup will be steaming its way to the table."

They walked through a corridor paneled with pink foam-rubber. "Quiet, here," the Prince Consort whispered, one wingtip to his beak. "The Hatchery Royal, wherein lies encased our future Matriarch, is just beyond." He nodded to the chamber-guards, giant Mumese with billhooks clutched under their copper-feathered wings. They saluted with their weapons and pulled back the drapes to disclose the innermost shrine of the Matriarchate of Mum.

The Egg Royal was, Sir Nigel thought, bubbling internal laughter that threatened to explode, the size and shape of a china chamberpot, with much the same sheen to its shell. He thought of debt and taxes and the dignity of his office, and managed not to laugh.

"Lak-a-day, Sar! Wot I ye'd be here with your lordly friends I'd have fluffed me feathers a trifle, to be proper preeked-out," the nursemaid whispered. She stood over the Egg, spread her wings and bowed in a curtsey.

"Sit easy, nurse," the prince said. He sniffed, and raised a feather to wipe away a tear. "Pardon me, humans," he said. "It always catches me . . . right here . . . to see my life's work being hatched to fruition."

Von Eingeweide replied by saluting the Egg. Sir Nigel did likewise.

The prince pointed the way they were to take and tip-clawed out. Sir Nigel followed, aware that his medals jingled abominably.

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"Sar! Your Highness, Sar!" It was the nursemaid, poor hen, so distraught that she was actually tugging at the Prince Consort's tail coverts. "Your Highness, Sar! The Egg Royal is quickening toward hatch!"

"The Queen! Go, nurse!" the prince shouted. "Fly! Fetch her Majesty at once!"

Fly the nurse did, twittering down the marble halls, her feathers frowzed with anxiety.

"Where is von Eingeweide?" Sir Nigel wondered.

"Please . . ." the consort said. "My head is spinning. The Queen must get here posthaste."

Something clattered on the floor beyond the drapes.

"The shell is broken," the prince wailed. "Oh, Sweet Oogenesis! What am I to do?"

From the Grand Ballroom came the roll of drums, long, doomful music, a funerary noise. A massed cry of anguish boomed through the Palace, fluttering the tapestries in the pink-padded hallway where the consort, a claw clutched to his crown, stood like indecisive Hamlet beside Mountchessington-Jackson.

"The Queen is dead!" shouted the banquet guests.

Trumpets shrilled. High-pitched, a second, joyous cry rent the air: "Long live the Egg!"

Generalfeldmarschall Graf Gerhard von Eingeweide walked down the hall toward Sir Nigel and the prince. Hand in wing he walked with the new Matriarch of Mum, lately Egg Royal.

"Look who I found," he said.

"Who are these people, Mamma?" the Matriarch demanded. "You gotta tell me things Mamma. I'm new here."

III

"First Egg!" the Prince Consort moaned. He fell backwards in a dead faint.

"Help!" Sir Nigel shouted. "Help! he cried at the top of his quarterdeck lungs.

"Noisy thing," the chick said. "Mamma, tell him be quiet."

"Don't call him Mamma," Sir Nigel said to the damp-downed infant. "Uncle, yes; Mamma, no."

The newborn's beak quivered. "Is he telling you to reject me, Mama?" she asked.

"No, no, *Liebchen*," the Stahlheim ambassador said, getting down to his knees beside the little creature. He put her head against his left epaulette and patted it. "Gerhard loves you chickabiddy."

Redleg led the procession of aid that poured into the pink hallway. He stopped at the sight of the unconscious prince. "What happened?" he demanded.

"The demned Hun was in the Hatchery when her young Majesty cracked out," Sir Nigel said.

"Tell these folks to be quiet, Mamma," the chick peeped. "I can't hardly hear myself think."

"Saints preserve us!" Redleg gasped. "She speaks!"

"Doesn't everyone?" the new Queen asked. She preened her golden down against von Eingeweide's shoulder. "I'd as soon be born naked

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as speechless. Oh, it's strange out here! You'll help me get used to it, won't you, Mamma?"

"That's what Mammas are for, *Hertzchen*," the Generalfeldmarschall said.

"For a starter, Mamma, please get these funny people, specially that funny man who's asleep on my floor, out of here. Please? I think we should be alone."

"Anything your heart desires, my little chickadee," von Eingeweide said. He stood. "Everybody out!" he shouted. He addressed the guards. "Carry his bereaved Highness to the second-best bedchamber," he said.

"Yes, your Majesty!" the guards snapped. They grabbed up the widower prince and flew him down the hall.

"I'm hungry, Mamma," Redleg and Sir Nigel heard the new Matriarch chirp as they walked away. "Mince me up a nice fat worm, please."

"Anything you ask for, *Piepvogelchen*," the Graf von Eingeweide crooned. There was the snicker of a ceremonial sword being unsheathed. "Bring on night-crawlers and a chopping board!" he shouted at the nursemaid.

"This moment, Sar!" the nurse said, and bustled off with a flurry of feathers, down the hall.

"Nice Mamma," the chick said.

Those words thundered in Sir Nigel Mountchessington-Jackson's ears as he stepped aboard the Albionese helicopter. Too soul-sick to speak, he nodded for Redleg to head for home.

The next day was a National Day of Mourning. Sir Nigel mourned, filled with puzzle and resentment. "What happened? he demanded of himself. "What does this mean?"

"Sir?" It was Redleg, carrying a book.

"I'm hardly in a mood for literature, dem' your eyes!" Sir Nigel snapped.

"This just came over from the Stahlheim Embassy, your Excellency. Inscribed with the best wishes of the Graf von Eingeweide it is, sir. There is a bookmark, sir, and passages underlined in red. Can't make head or tail of it myself, sir."

"Let's have a dekko." Sir Nigel grabbed the book and read aloud its title: *Ueber die Psychologie des Vogelvolkes von Mum.*

"If it's written in German, sir, how will you read it?" Redleg demanded.

"With pain, my boy. With pain and exasperation," the Admiral said. He opened the book to the underlined bits.

"What does it say?" Redleg asked.

"I can attempt only a rough translation," Sir Nigel said. "It says, Lorenz with the new-hatched that the the movement with some domestic Earth-birds demonstrated and a following-response elicited; this the first eye-object concerning the reinal flicker and maybe sometimes only subsequent object capable of so doing becomes; and this acquired behavior never forgotten is; this the so-named imprinting is."

"That's still got a bit of kraut in it, sir," Redleg observed.

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Sir Nigel closed his eyes. "As I understand it, it means something like this. Were a duckling fresh out of its shell to meet as its first friend a frog, that frog would become the duckling's mother - object." He opened his eyes and banged his clenched-together fists on the open book. "And if a new-hatched Matriarch of Mum were to see the Stahlheimer Ambassador as her first moving object—"

"Blimey!" Redleg said. "He's the Queen Mother of Mum!"

"What will we do?" Sir Nigel moaned. "As Queen Mother, the demned Hun is in effect Regent of the planet. The new Matriarch won't be of age for five or six more years. During that time, her blasted Mamma will persuade her to conclude a military alliance with Stahlheim and to break off relations with Albion."

"Woe," Redleg said.

"You took the word from my mouth," the Admiral said.

"May I make a suggestion, sir?"

"By all means," Sir Nigel agreed, turning, his eyes wet with hope.

"I have a pitcher of fresh Frobishers, easy on the lemon-peel, in the refrigerator, sir."

"Join me, son; join me," Sir Nigel said. "With the Mumese wedding their electronic marplottery with the craft of the bloody Stahlheimers, we'll have no refrigerators soon enough. Nor radio, television, spacecraft, radar, electric motors, automobiles, aircraft or traffic-lights. Woe, indeed." He sipped the tall drink his batman poured him. "Think, man. Think!"

"I'm thinking fiercely, sir," Redleg said.

"I'll go to the Palace Royal tomorrow," the Admiral said. "I'll beg the audience with the Queen Mother, dem' his eyes! and I'll find some way to frustrate his knavish tricks, confound his politics . . ."

"God save the Queen, sir!"

"Precisely, my boy, Just so," Sir Nigel said. "If nothing more, I'll have to repay the Boche for his ruddy cheek in sending me that bloody book, boasting what he's done and showing how he's done it. Imprinting, indeed! I'll imprint several knuckles on his lean, Teutonic jowl, give me half a chance!"

"If I dare say so, sir, this is occasion for brain, not brawn."

"It's only the thought of our superior brainpower that keeps me from taking the gaspipe and planting a shilling in the meter," Sir Nigel said. "Whilst we think, you might refresh the drinks, Redleg."

The next day all Ovum, all the planet Mum, boiled in holiday.

As Sir Nigel Mountchessington-Jackson and Redleg flittered across East Hatchery Avenue, the skies about them writhed with laughing citizens. "Long live the Queen!" they cried. The human machine blundered through their graceful ranks like a hippo in a flamingo-pond. "Make merry for the Matriarch!" they called to one another. Hot, bright pills from Roman candles flakked through the schools of jubulating citizens and sparked to death on the belly of the Albionese 'copter.

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Mourning for the dead Matriarch, satisfied by one day's observance, had ended. Egg-shaped balloons bubbled up from the Oval. The trees of that great park were spiderwebbed with bunting in the colors royal of green and gold.

The air about the whirlybird throbbed with the chant from half a million throats, a dithyramb that recalled to the Admiral the "Fight-Team-Fight!" short-skirted girls in Yankee stadia screamed out, springing high and waving pennants and flashing panties harlequined with the ensign of the warriors they urged into the fray. "Though the drum sticks here displayed are less toothsome than those," Sir Nigel murmured.

"Sir?" Redleg shouted, turning back from his controls.

"I was thinking of an American rugger-festival I once observed on the telly," the Ambassador yelled back. "Those Yanks are funny folk, my boy. Did you know they celebrate a special day for trees?"

"Never studied anthropology myself, sir," Redleg admitted. The noise abated at they dropped toward the landing-stage of the Palace Royal.

"Yes, indeed," Sir Nigel said. "Chap I met back in Camelot suggested that this Arbor Day of theirs was a Druidic revival. Ah, well. To our muttons, Redleg."

The aide-de-camp sprang to the platform, saluting and holding open the door. The heralds were absent, the trumpeters not to be heard. Though hung with banners and awash with serpentines of ribbon, the palace seemed deserted. "Disgraceful," Mountchessington-Jackson said. "Ghastly breach of good taste, to allow an Ambassador to arrive unannounced."

"If I may point out, sir, we're one step from *non grat*," Redleg said. "I fancy our sour, kraut friend will have us tossed off this planet before sundown."

"We've not fallen out of the boat yet, boy," the Admiral said. "Have faith, and watch for the other side to bumble one. We'll carry our bat home, just you see." They stepped into the Grand Ballroom.

IV

"Hey, now, fellows!" A second lieutenant of Munese Air Reserve fluttered up and landed at Sir Nigel's feet, where he lifted a half-hearted salute with his left wing. "If you don't mind, boys, the tradesmen's entrance is at the rear of the Place."

"I am the Queen of Albion's Ambassador Plenipotentiary to the Matriarchate of Mum," Sir Nigel rapped.

"Sounds like a good racket," the lieutenant observed.

"Soldier, if you don't lead me this instant to the Queen Mother, I will personally see to it that you finish out your enlistment as grease-trap specialist in an infantry mess," the Admiral said. "Now get crackin'!"

"As you say, Mac; though you gotta understand that I am acting under orders, and that any action into which I am forced under duress..."

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"You're five seconds from wearing combat boots, bay!" Sir Nigel shouted.

"Follow me," the lieutenant said. "*Eintritt verboten,* those were the Queen Mother's very words. But what's a guy to do when someone comes on big with the rank-bit?" He fluttered down the Grand Ballroom, landing to draw aside the drapes and allow the two Albionese to enter into the chamber occupied by the Hatchling Royal, the nursemaid, and Gerhard von Eingeweide, Queen Mother of Mum.

"My dear Nigel!" the Generalfeldmarschall said, springing up from his hassock. "So good of you to call." He held out his right hand. "You may kiss it," he allowed.

"Demned if I . . ."

"If you don't kiss Mamma's wing, I'll call the guards and have them pull your feathers off," the new Matriarch peeped.

Sir Nigel puckered bitter lips and bent to peck von Eingeweide's index finger.

"Nice man," the Hatchling said. "Did you come to help Mamma? Mamma is teaching me a new game. It's called, *Making a Treaty*. It's hard. I'm gonna haft to sign my name."

"Your Majesty," the Admiral addressed the Matriarch, "do you intend to sign your Treaty today?"

"Oh, my, no!" Chick said. "Today is a holiday, because of my accession. You can't do anything legal on a holiday. Isn't that right, Mamma?"

"Quite corrjct," the Stahlheimer said. He smiled at Mountchessington-Jackson and Redleg. "Not even deportation orders can take effect on a Mumese holiday."

"Tomorrow I get to sign a Treaty. Whee!' the Matriarch cheeped.

"And the deportation orders?" Sir Nigel asked.

"Tomorrow," von Eingeweide said. "I would prefer, by the way, that her Majesty sign just one such document. For you, dear Sir Nigel."

"How about me?" Redleg wailed.

"The Queen Mother needs a cook." The Generalfeldmarschall seated himself on his hassock and tapped his fingertips together. "At the Albionese Embassy's open house, two weeks since, Redleg, I tasted a Rognons Charentais one could not equal this side of Paris." Von Eingeweide closed his eyes, kissed his fingers in the gesture of gastronomic gratification. "For those kidneys of yours, Redleg, I will have you made chief of the Palace kitchens."

"Never!" Redleg swore. "I am a cook, sir. From my youth a master of Grand Cuisine. But I am an Albionese, too, sir, and I will not desert my colors even in such a bitter hour as this."

"Two deportation orders, then," von Eingeweide sighed. "Ah, well. I'll make do somehow."

"Cracked corn is very nice, Mamma," the Matriarch piped up.

"Please, darling. This is Mamma-talk." The Ambassador from Stahlheim returned his attention to his visitors. "You gentlemen must leave tomorrow. Is that understood?"

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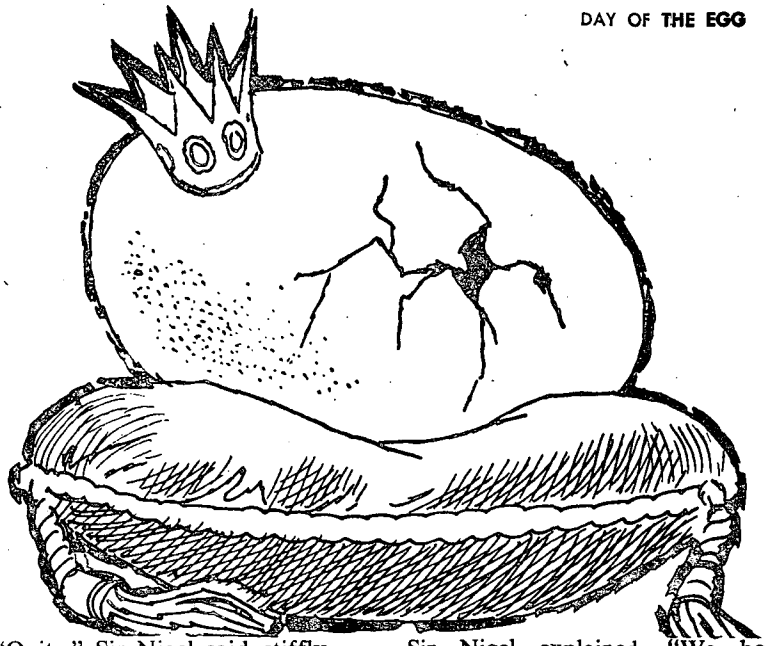

"Quite," Sir Nigel said stiffly.

"Good-bye! Good-bye!" the Matriarch cheeped.

"Not yet, you little . . . dear," von Eingeweide snapped.

"It tears my heart to leave on such a day," Sir Nigel said. He raised his arm to blot his eyes on the sleeve of his uniform.

"Sir?" Redleg asked.

"A personal anniversary, if one may ask?" von Eingeweide inquired.

"A dear, dear anniversary," Sir Nigel said.

"We'd best be going, sir," Redleg said.

"Pardon my weakness," the Admiral said. "It's just that leaving Mum on Mother's-Day . . ."

"Mamma's-Day?" the Chick tweeted.

"A holiday amongst our people," Sir Nigel explained. "We honor thereon poor, gray-feathered Mother with gifts of perfume, cigarettes and chocolate. We take her out to dinner. We bring her great bouquets of long-stemmed roses . . ."

"Mamma, why dint you tell me?" the Matriarch wailed. She brightened. "I understand, Mamma. You dint want me to feel bad 'cause I dint know about it." She clapped her wings together and chortled, "We're gonna have a Mamma's-Day on Mum, tomorrow, or I'll chop off everyone's head. And I'll bring you presents. And flowers. And polish your boots. And mash up worms for you. And . . ."

"The day will be," Sir Nigel asked, "a National Holiday?"

"I'll say!" the Matriarch replied. "The biggest one of all!"

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"A legal holiday," Redleg remarked. "No deportation orders, no treaties."

"One day," the Generalfeldmarschall growled in English. "That's all you've gained by this chicanery, Mountchessington-Jackson. One *lausige* day. And we'll sign the treaty, just you wait and see, at one minute past midnight!"

"Can I take you out to dinner, Mamma?" the Hatchling demanded.

"Of course, Liebling," von Eingeweide said. "We'll have a banquet right here in the Palace Royal. And Redleg will damned well come over tomorrow to cook us the finest feast ever spread on this planet, won't you, Redleg?"

Redleg shuffled his boots. "Sir?" he asked the Admiral.

Sir Nigel put an arm across his aide's shoulder. "It rather seems that I outsmarted myself this time," he said. "Think nothing of it, my lad. One can't always end up winner."

The Stahlheimer barked a laugh. "We can't deport you tomorrow, but I can take advantage of your day of grace," he said. "Note this well. We will require for our banquet, the entire resources of the Albionese Embassy, wine-cellars and food-lockers alike."

"Hoist by mine own petard, dem' me if I'm not!" Sir Nigel swore. "Blast your eyes, von Eingeweide, you've foxed me proper this time."

"Get used to the slippery end of the stick, Sir Nigel," the Generalfeldmarschall said in English. "Once these stupid birds have enlisted their electronic gifts in the service of Stahlheim's arms, your Albion will become a province-planet. Quite a feather in my cap, wouldn't you say?"

"Invite him!" the Chick said. "Tell your friend to come to our Mamma's-Day party."

"Aber natuerlich!" von Eingeweide said. "Dear Nigel, be our guest." He raised a silver whistle to his lips and piped a high silvery note.

The young lieutenant from the Mumese Air Reserve popped in. "The Queen Mother calls?" he asked, drawn up rigid as a roasted, stuffed duck.

"I do," the Stahlheimer said. "Take yon skinny fellow to the Royal Kitchens. Lay on air transport to bring the contents of the Albionese Embassy's fat pantries here to the Palace. And *mach's schnell!"*

"Yessir!" The lieutenant seized Redleg's hand and towed him from the room.

"I believe that's all for now, Sir Nigel," von Eingeweide said. "We'll see you at dinner tomorrow. White tie, if you please."

"Just as you say." Wearing Corona today, Sir Nigel bowed low. "Good day, your Majesties," he said, with a grimace.

"You may withdraw," the Queen Mother said. Grinning like a lynx, he added, "You will walk backwards from our Majesties, of course, bowing every other step. Mind you don't trip up on your sword, old boy."

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V

The Prussian's insane laughter echoed through the halls of Admiral Sir Nigel Mountchessington-Jackson's dreams that Mother's-Day Eve. The festive dawn woke the Ambassador of Albion to fresh horrors.

With Redleg absorbed in the menu for the banquet and supervising the removal of booty from his kitchen, Sir Nigel was unable to strap himself into even Corona-Corona, the mildest of his restraints. In consequence, Sir Nigel found himself wearing his largest uniform as a dead-ripe tomato wears its skin, apt to burst out at any moment.

The breakfast Mountchessington-Jackson prepared for himself, working in a kitchen a-flutter with dismantling-crews, was a meal to pale the palate of a Texas fry-cook. Fat kippers, burnt black port and starboard, lay on the Admiral's plate like victim of a mine explosion. His tea turned out to be the sort of fluid tropical explorers drop on leeches to make them loose their hold. The marmalade had been unwittingly left open during Sir Nigel's experiment with the kippers. It tasted of fish.

Crunching digestive mints. Mountchessington - Jackson walked across East Hatchery Avenue and into the park of the Oval. Untouched he was by the fragrance of the spicebark trees, unmoved by the singing laughter of the Mumese infants dive-bombing their young selves into the pool.

He tried not to look up through the trees, for he knew that the Mumese Air Transport Command was shuttling his possessions to the Palace, right over his head. Off with his cases of Clos de Vougeot '26. Off with his ripe and tender beeves. Off with the great burlap treasure-troves of Idahoes, flown across the galaxy in search of vegetable nirvana beneath his sour cream and chives. Each little pot and pan and pastry-whisk was crystallized nostalgia. If his little silver peppermill, even, could speak, what tales of rich repast, of wit and repartee exchanged across the wine-glasses of a thousand dinners, could it tell! But gone now the silver peppermill, gone the Embassy's silver service entire, gone all but hope . . .

The Admiral wiped away a tear, set his tricorn straight, and swore through his teeth: "Defeat, perhaps; dishonor, never!"

He slicked his sword from its scabbard and had at a rosebush to his left, whacking off its topmost buds. "Take that, you Teuton tyrant!" he shouted. The uniform, taut as balloon-skin, groaned protest at his athleticism. Sir Nigel, glancing about to see that his swordplay had gone unobserved, resheathed his weapon.

The Queen Mother and the Hatchling Royal had granted Redleg this one boon: that he be allowed to compound the Mother's-Day Banquet without interference from the Palace kitchen help. Set the tables, polish pans, smoothe the linens, buff the Albionese Embassy's purloined silver to a chromic gloss:

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these things Redleg allowed the natives to do. All else was his domain.

Alone, his shirtcuffs turned up and the *toque blanche* perched like an esculent mushroom on his head, Redleg blended his sauces and tested his ovens. He sang to himself the heroic, the sometimes ribald, 'low-decks songs of Her Albionese Majesty's Senior Service as he sprinkled paprika over his asperges au gratin. This would be a meal to change the course of empire, he thought, trudging from mixing-bowl to bubbling pot of Court Bouillon. This day was his day to produce a masterpiece, his thesis for the Lucullus Circle.

Come what might, this was his finest hour in battle for sweet Albion.

From the escargots through the caraway-seed soup to the filets-of-sole-with grapes and the filet mignon Rossini (cut julienne to approximate the form of succulent worms), the banquet was in the strictest sense of the phrase, for the birds.

After all, Redleg faced a problem few chefs have solved to the entire satisfaction of all parties: to prepare a feast equally attractive to humans and to ilfs of another ilk. Intelligent life-forms the universe over, at least those of carbohydrate-protein persuasion, always found ethyl alcohol attractive. But would the Mumese care for his dessert-drink, made with rum and brandy? Redleg fervently hoped that they would.

"Sir?" it was the senior kitchen boy, a cup clutched in one wing-tip. "Where do these go, sir?"

"Right of the rightmost wineglass," Redleg instructed. He followed the lad from the kitchen to inspect the banquet-hall. The great table, set for sixty, glittered. Little maids in Palace gold and green fluttered about the grand chandelier, lighting its candles with tapers gripped in their beaks. Footmen stood at attention by the great entrance door. A squad of pikemen marched in, rattling like turnkeys, and took up their posts against the tapestries.

Redleg paced around the table, straightening a fork here, pushing a wineglass into alignment there. He tugged out his pocket watch. In twenty minutes the flow of dishes from his kitchens would commence, each carried forth at its very peak of perfection.

Redleg smiled. The Admiral, who'd hatched this stratagem, often spoke of logistics; but Sir Nigel had never been required to prepare a dinner of three dozen courses, each due at table at a precise moment, each requiring its partner-wine to be on hand to greet it.

The Royal String Ensemble trooped in, bows in their beaks, to take seats behind the Chinese curtain at the head of the table. Soft music wafted up to glittering lights. Redleg smiled.

"We're off," he said, "and bob's your uncle!"

Footsore in this city of wings, Admiral Sir Nigel Mountchessington-Jackson made his weary way to the Palace Royal. His uniform was

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stained where he'd leaned against the trunk of a spicebark tree; and his epaulettes which Redleg always sit as straight across his shoulder-peaks as beam-tiles, now hung askew.

There were times, he thought, when mufti would be a blessing. He squared his shoulders. If his plan this evening failed, it would be mufti for him and slavery for them all. "Screw your courage to its sticking-place, and we'll not fail!" he told himself.

As the strains of *God Save the Queen* came welling out past the Lord High Chamberlain, Sir Kekketeks Kekketak, the Ambassador from Albion marched up the parquet, grim as though his dinner were to be followed by his firing-squad.

"Admiral Sir Nigel Mountchessington-Jackson, Ambassador Plenipotentiary of the excellent Kingdom of Albion!" a footman boomed.

"We are so pleased to welcome you again, Sir Nigel," Sir Kekketeks said, pressing his wingtips together in formal greeting.

The Admiral saluted his anthem and nodded. As the music segued into a medley of Mumese folksongs, he said, "I'd not have missed this for the world, old fellow."

"Her Majesty the Matriarch is discussing affairs of state with your colleague from Stahlheim," the Chamberlain said. "As you can well imagine, our Chick Royal is inseparable from the Count von Eingeweide."

"Motherhood," Sir Nigel sighed. "It's beautiful."

The other guests were arriving in palanquins borne in the claws of gay-feathered liftsmen, each aerial conveyance tinkling with the hundred silver bells hung about its canopies.

"His Grace, the Duke of Borax!" the footmen shouted. "Their Worships, the Margrave and Margravine of the Western Marches!" "The Poet Royal!" "Air Grand Marshal Viscount Kats!" Clearly, this dinner was to be digested in the most distinguished crops of Mum. Like a schoolboy, Sir Nigel crossed his fingers, and tucked his superstitious interdigitation inside his jacket.

The Grand March commenced.

The guests paired off to be led to their seats. Each diner was accompanied, as was the Mumese royal custom, by his personal servitor, whose duty it was to fan wings behind the chair, affording a salubrious flow of air over the shoulders of his charge.

Fifty-seven of Mum's great men and ladies stood at their places, and Sir Nigel at his, awaiting the Matriarch and the Queen Mother. The strings paused in their bowing.

There was a roll of drums, and the Anthem Royal, *The Egg and I*, burst forth, pointed with fanfaronade of trumpets. The Hatchling, her tiny wing stretched up to nestle in the paw of Queen Mother the Graf von Eingeweide, stepped into the hall.

"Gentlemen and Ladies: Her Majesty the Matriarch; His Majesty, the Queen Mother!" the heralds bellowed, all six of them in unison.

Wingtips stretched to sweep the

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floor. Sir Nigel, uncumbered by whalebone and rubber, did a bow to credit a Japanese.

"My friends," the Hatchling cheeped, "let us dine!"

"Let us hope," Sir Nigel whispered, scooting his chair to the table.

The wines were well received. Redleg, wanting his viands to meet un-anesthesized palates, had specified the lighter varieties for the first few laps of his meal. With the escargots, the Montrachet white Burgundy. With the caraway seed soup, Redwing demonstrated his courage by presenting a very sharp young Sercial, just the juice to marry with the butter-rich soup. A mild Vouvray accompanied the sole with grapes. Her Majesty the Matriarch was heard to hiccup as she finished her second glass of the effervescent wine. She was after all, Sir Nigel thought in extenuation, only two days old.

With the vermiform steaks, Redwing served a wine without parallel in the galaxy, the proudest *beerenauslese* red Moselle from the slopes of Heldenberg, in Stahlheim; a wine fermented from the very best grapes of the very finest bunches grown on the very aristocrats among that planet's vines. Von Eingeweide beamed and bowed left and right as he accepted congratulations from the Mumese notables on this product of his homeland, neglecting to mention that the noble wine had been raped from the cellars of Admiral Sir Nigel Mountchessington-Jackson.

"Marvelous, Herr Generalfeldmarschall," Kekketeks Kekketak said, gulping a length of the filet mignon Rossini.

"Splendid, indeed!" the Air Grand Marshal chortled, a spear of asparagus tucked into the corner of his beak like a beatnik's cigarette.

The game-course, a venison stew matched with a brisk, impudent California red, was welcomed with an applause of wings.

The Matriarch, however, pushed back her plate. "I like the drinking part bestest," she said. Sir Nigel judged her a bit tiddly. "What kind of wine goes in those little cups?" she demanded, pointing to the silver hourglass to her right.

Redleg, standing near the Royal Mite, bowed over her shoulder. "That, Madam, is an egg cup," he said. "It really shouldn't have been placed on the dinner table." He reached to take it away.

"An egg cup!" the Matriarch said, clapping her wings over her beak in delight. "That's nice! I was an egg myself, once, you know."

"Yes, your Majesty," Redleg said.

"How do you use it?" she asked. "Tell me, please."

"The egg, soft-boiled, is placed in the cup with the broader end uppermost, your Majesty," Redleg said. "Working with either knife or spoon, the diner removes the shell to expose the succulent meat of the egg. A spoon is the preferred instrument for the actual eating."

"You boil eggs? And cut them up?" the Matriarch asked. Her little body trembled. "Mamma!" she screamed. "I'm scared!"

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"What's the matter here?" von Eingeweide bellowed, standing so abruptly his medals clashed together. His keen eyes took in the egg-cup in Redleg's hand. "Remove those things at once," he ordered. Servants rushed in to collect and hide the offending utensils.

VI

The Albionese Admiral eased the watch from his waistcoat. Eleven-thirty.

In thirty-one minutes, a Treaty binding the Mumese and their electronic marplottery to the war machine of Stahlheim would be signed by the drunken infant at the end of the table and the Generalfeldmarschall beside her. Now was the time, if ever, for Redleg to strike his second blow.

"Redleg, you may return to the kitchens," von Eingeweide snapped. The guests, who'd been chattering over their venison stew, glanced up. "I do not wish you to return until it's time to wash the dishes, understand?"

"Yes, your Excellency," Redleg said, bowing. "Might I suggest first, for her Majesty, a bit of dessert?"

"I like dessert!" the Chick peeped, her fears forgotten. "What is it? Caterpillars - with - chocolate? Cinnamon ants? Candied weevils?"

"For her young Majesty, Ive prepared a nice plum trifle," Redleg said. "For the adults, there's a drink made with rum and brandy, quite thick and sweet, to be served before the coffee."

"I wanna drink the rum-and-brandy," the Matriarch shrilled, accenting each word with a hammer of her spoon against her dinner plate.

Redleg stepped back from the venison spray.

"To the kitchens with you, and send out that rum-and-brandy dessert for the Matriarch and all the rest," von Eingeweide shouted.

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"Fefehl is Befehl, Herr Generalfeldmarschall," Redleg snapped, slamming his heels together. "Dessert for the Matriarch!" he said; and about-faced and marched away.

"Dessert for the Matriarch!" shouted the Mumese pikemen at the kitchen door.

"Dessert for the Matriarch!" the Chief Steward yelled at the two kitchen boys, gussied up for the occasion in the finery of table servants.

"Dessert for the Matriarch!" the lads piped. They picked up the silver tray whereon sixty silver cups and a huge silver bowl rested, the handle of a silver ladle peeking over its brim. Grunting, they lifted the tray and marched in step to a position to the left of Generalfeldmarschall Gerhard von Eingeweide. "Dessert for the Matriarch," they explained.

"Nice Mamma," the Royal Chick said.

"Nothing's too good for my little darling," von Eingeweid beamed. He picked up a cup and ladled in the golden sauce. "For you, my dear," he said, passing the cup to his left.

"Thank you, Mamma." The Matriarch waited impatiently while a third kitchen boy appeared to spoon dessert into the fifty-nine cups remaining, and the tray bearers marched around the table to present each diner with a cup.

Von Eingeweide, last served, stood, saluting the Royal Infant. "Gentlemen and Ladies: To the Matriarch of Mum!" he toasted.

"To the Matriarch!" the diners cried, scooting back their chairs to stand.

"To me!" the youngster giggled. She dipped her beak deep into the drink. "Mmmmm," she said, emerging with sauce thick on her beak from eyes to throat. "Thank you, Mamma," she said.

"Delicious," Air Grand Marshal Viscount Kats grunted.

"Happy-making," Royal High Chamberlain Sir Kekketeks Kekketak decided.

His Grace, the Duke of Borax voiced popular sentiment when he turned, holding out his cup, and said, "More, if you please."

"I simply must have the recipe," the Margravine of the Western Marches cooed to the gentleman to her right, publisher of the infuential *Daily Syrinx.*

"Yes, Mamma," the Matriarch peeped, having overheard the Margravine. "How's this juice made?"

"Send to the kitchens for the prescription of this glorious drink," the Graf von Eingeweide instructed his personal servitor.

A moment later the man was back, beak gapping, the feathers of his head awry. "Sir," he gasped, handing a slip of paper to the Stahlheimer. "The recipe." Having performed his duty, the fellow toppled to the floor unconscious.

"Tell me, Mamma!" the Matriarch shrilled, slapping her tiny wingtips to the tabletop. "Tell us how it's mixed."

"Perfidious Albion!" the Generalfeldmarschall cursed, looking up from the note that had been brought him from the kitchen.

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"Simply *must* know," the Dowager Duchess of Duckmarsh gushed. "Pardon me, your Excellency," She took the note from von Eingeweide's nerveless fingers, and read.

"Incorrupt Incubation!" the Duchess screamed. " 'Six dozen eggs, newborn', it says; 'the yolks beat reentlessly'." She fell backwards, knocking to the floor the lackey who stood behind her chair.

"Treason!" the Royal High Chamberlain shouted. "Guards, seize that man!" His pointing wingup was like a sword at Generalfeldmarschall Graf Gerhard von Eingeweide's pale throat.

"*Lese majesty!*" the Duke of Borax growled.

"Blasphemy!" the Bishop of Little Hatching cried, clutching tight the golden egg that hung about his throat.

Von Eingeweide, his shouting heard above the pandemonium, was quick-marched from the hall between two squads of pike bearers. The Matriarch of Mum was sobbing hysterically. "Mamm?," she wept, "how could you?"

"It's all right, my dear," Sir Nigel Mountchessington - Jackson said, smoothing the Chick's crown-feathers with a huge hand.

"Gentlemen, Ladies!" the Bishop shouted, his ecclesiastically-strengthened voice bludgeoning through the din. The company, standing back from the table von Eingeweide's cannibalistic drink had made unclean, ceased their bewailing. Those on the floor opened their eyes and awaited words of comfort. The few who'd left the room to vent their disgust returned, red-eyed and ruffled, to hear what their Lord Spiritual had to offer them.

"It is my sad duty," the Bishop of Little Hatching announced, in organ-tones that rattled the wine-glasses, "to declare our beloved Matriarch an orphan."

"On Mamma's-Day," the chick whimpered. "That's what makes it all *so awful.*"

"Acting as a member of the Regency Committee which I hereby establish, a group constituted to serve as surrogate Queen Mother until our beloved Queen's fortunate issue of Egg, I moreover declare the Ambassador Plenipotentiary of Stahheim *persona non grata* and revoke his credentials," the Bishop said.

Sir Nigel Mountchessington-Jackson again consulted his watch. It was now the first minute of the day after Mother's-Day. He stood. "Honorables," he said. "Your Majesty. Now that we have all been shown the disgustingly ovivorous nature of our common Enemy, I urge that a treaty binding the Matriarchate of Mum and the Kingdom of Albion to an eternal alliance be signed without delay."

"He's right," the Dowager Duchess of Duckmarsh said. "Our sweet eggs are not safe in the nest, with monsters like that in the System!"

"Bring me a pen," the Matriarch said. "Someone show me how to write my name, and I'll sign the treaty." A tear dropped on the parchment as the Chick, her wing guided by that of the Bishop, traced

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her name beneath the few and simple lines that meant safety to Albion.

Sir Nigel placed his name and rank beneath her Majesty's. Stahlheim's spaceships would nevermore haunt the skies of Albion, guarded as she would henceforth be by Mumese marplots chosen for their talent in damping-out electromagnetic fields.

"Splendid meal, Redleg." Admiral Sir Nigel Mountchessington-Jackson said. Reclining in his favorite Morris-chair in the Albionese Embassy, the Ambassador was draped in his scarlet dressing-gown. "I must confess, there were moments when I feared it was stumps with us, Redleg. Demned Hun had things sewed up, what with being Queen Mother."

"I rather fancy him landing to find his head wanted on a lance outside the Volkrat gates, don't you, sir?" Redleg asked.

"Gerhard's not a bad sort, for a Boche," Sir Nigel said. "I trust they'll be satisfied with reducing him to lance-corporal in one of their polar battalions . . . Better he than I."

"Precisely, sir," Redleg said. "If I may make so bold, sir, this occasion seems suitable for a nip."

"Join me," the Admiral said smiling broadly.

"Eggnog, perhaps? There's a good bit left."

"Hell you say!"

"Very well, sir," Redleg said. "I've taken the liberty, sir, of preparing a pitcher of Frobishers."

"You're a jewel, Redleg," Sir Nigel said.

"Thank you, sir," the batman said, pouring two glasses. "Rather hard lines on the Royal Chick, losing her mother, don't you think?"

"My heart goes out," the Admiral admitted. "But we must always remember what we've learned in battle, my boy."

"Yes, sir. One can't make an omelette without cracking eggs, sir," Redleg said. "Here you are, sir, and easy on the lemon-peel it is, sir."

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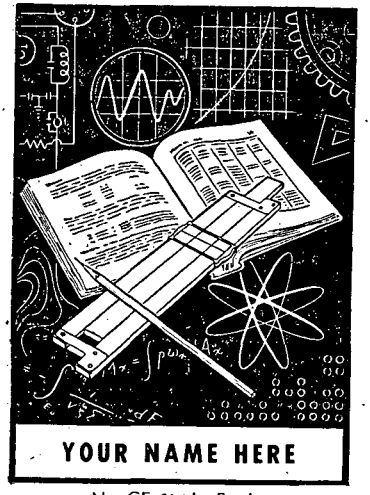

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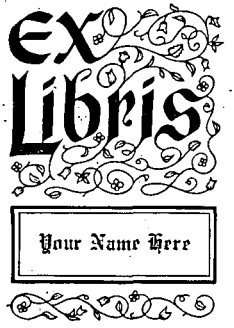

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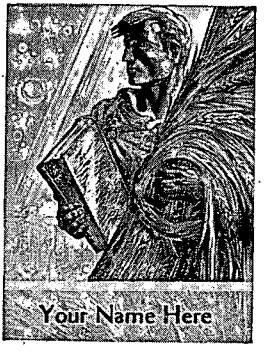

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